THE MAN FROM PAINTED POST

JOSEPH B. AMES

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THE MAN FROM PAINTED POST

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By JOSEPH B. AMES

AUTHOR OF
"Shoe-Bar Stratton," etc.

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UPB

TO

H. B. V. L. AND F. VAN V. L.

WITH AFFECTIONATE APPRECIATION

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CHAPTER I

THE MAN ON THE MOUNTAIN

THE scrubby little cow-pony, negotiating that final steep ascent, slipped suddenly on a rolling pebble and regained his balance only by a desperate, sidewise heave of his wiry body. Instantly there came an ominous, rending snap, and abruptly the saddle began to twist, forcing Miss Sherwood to alight hurriedly.

"Oh!" she cried. Then, bending swiftly, she perceived the ragged, dangling ends of the cinch. "Why, it 's—broken!" she added in dismay.

She straightened slowly, her attractive face perplexed and troubled. She was tall and slim and carried herself with a certain grace and distinction of bearing which seemed as curiously out of place in this primitive mountain wilderness

as her perfectly fitting, expensively tailored riding-clothes. Save for the wide-brimmed felt hat, set at a slight, becoming angle on her wavy chestnut hair, that costume was a counterpart in its every finished detail of what one may see a dozen times during a brief stroll along the bridle-paths of Central Park.

Presently the horse moved restlessly, and with a little start the girl grasped the bridle-reins she had left dangling. Then, realizing that running away was the last thing he could have in mind, she dropped them again and with something of an effort straightened the heavy saddle.

The movement brought into clearer view one dangling end of the broken cinch. It was strained and worn and almost rotten, and as she bent to examine it closely, the girl frowned and gave an exclamation of annoyance.

"It ought to have been replaced ages ago," she said impatiently. "But it 's just like everything else about the ranch—down at the heel and utterly shiftless. I don't see how any man can let things go to rack and ruin the way uncle does, just out of sheer laziness or——"

She broke off with a shrug and, stripping off her gloves, explored the pockets of her modish, long-skirted riding-coat in the hope of coming on

a bit of cord. She found nothing there or in the saddle-pocket, and, with the realization that she had not even a pocket-knife with which it might have been possible to slit a trip of leather from the reins, her face grew serious.

"Not so awfully prepared, myself," she murmured in chagrin. "But I must fix it somehow—or walk twelve miles. I wonder whether I could —could hook it together with bent hair-pins."

It seemed a rather forlorn hope, despite the marvels which are sometimes accomplished by that simple means, but under the circumstances Anne Sherwood was ready to try anything. She realized, however, that the rough, steep slope of the gully was not a favorable spot for making experiments. It would be better to retrace her steps or else lead the horse on to that comparatively level shoulder of the mountain which had been her goal. The latter, being much nearer, decided her in its favor; and, taking the reins, she began the ascent, moving a little slowly because of its steepness and also the stiffness of her tan riding-boots.

Nearing the summit, she realized that the view, which was what had tempted her from the regular trail into this tortuous, scarcely visible side-track, was going to be even wider and more extended than she had hoped. With each step upward she

seemed to gain an added mile of sweeping, forest-covered slopes, broken by massive piled cliffs rising sheer and precipitous out of the sea of green, or sliced by wicked-looking gorges. Wild, chaotic, reaching apparently to infinite horizons, with nowhere a single sign of man's puny presence, it was a picture that stirred the girl strangely and made her forget for an instant not only her annoying present plight but all that loneliness and distress and vain longings which for so many, many days had bitten into her very soul.

Panting a little with the climb, she reached the level, irregular plateau. To her right it widened for a space, then narrowed sharply, and as the girl, startled by a swift sense of movement in that direction, hastily turned her head, her heart leaped chokingly.

Close to the sheer, inner cliffs that towered above the plateau for many hundred feet, a man sat his horse motionless. Long-limbed he was, broad of shoulder and very dark. His hard black eyes were fixed intently on her, and one muscular brown hand gripped a revolver that pointed in her direction.

That, at least, was the swift, vivid impression Anne received as she stood paralyzed, pulse throb-

bing in her throat and bright color fading. She was especially certain about the revolver, for the sun glinted on its barrel, and it was the sudden drawing of the weapon, she felt, that had first caught her attention. And yet an instant later she realized, with a puzzled shock of incredulity, that it was back in its holster! There had been the merest lightning movement—swift, almost, as the momentary nervous blinking of her long-lashed lids—at the end of which his empty hand was rising to his Stetson.

"Howdy, ma'am," he greeted her briefly and unsmilingly, as his horse moved slowly forward. "Looks like yuh were in trouble."

Anne swallowed hard and forced a smile to her pale lips. "The—cinch broke—back there," she informed him rather unnecessarily.

"I see."

He swung himself lightly out of the saddle and came forward, letting the reins trail. He was even taller than she had thought, slim-loined, wide of shoulder, moving with a lithe, unconscious grace that told of powerful muscles under perfect control. To Anne his well worn leather chaps, high-heeled boots and typical cow-puncher garb was somewhat reassuring; but the steady, watchful scrutiny of his dark eyes still affected her un-

pleasantly. When he dropped on his heels to examine the broken cinch she was curiously relieved at the shifting of his glance.

"Reckon we can fix that," he commented briefly.

Rising, he lifted the saddle off the cow-pony and turned it over. Loosening the cinch-buckle, he drew out the strip of webbing so that the frayed edges came together. Then he produced a pocket-knife and a small roll of rawhide thong and set to work.

Standing beside him, Anne found herself watching with an unexpected interest the deft, sure movements of those supple brown fingers. His hands were big but very much the reverse of clumsy as he accurately punched holes in the webbing and afterward drew the edges firmly together with the rawhide lacing. She also observed that, though callous, they were clean and the nails well cared for.

Presently her glance crept upward, dwelling briefly on the square, cleft chin, straight lips, and lean curve of cheek, smooth shaven and deeply tanned, which was visible under the hat-brim tilted sidewise against the sun. There was strength there, but of what sort, she wondered. Then suddenly she met his swiftly slanting glance and a flush crept up into her face.

"That 'll do, I reckon," he commented shortly. With a single agile movement of the hips, he stood upright and flung the saddle across the horse. "You better have 'em put in a new cinch, though, when yuh—get home."

"I will. I ought to have looked at it myself." She was annoyed at the color in her face and to show her indifference she half turned and glanced casually at his horse standing quietly a few feet away. "I can't thank you enough for having—— o-h!"

At her exclamation he whirled with the lithe swiftness of a panther, right hand dropping to his holster. She was staring at his horse, a bright sorrel with long, crinkly mane and tail of a lighter color. There were signs of blood and breeding in the animal, but his smooth coat was crisscrossed with cruel welts, some of which had bitten through the skin, leaving long ridges and scattered, half-healed sores.

"Well?" questioned the man curtly.

She made no answer. With a quick step or two she reached the sorrel and lifted a hesitating hand toward his velvet nozzle. He did not shy or start back, but shrank a little from her hand and turned his head to one side. As he did so he saw that the edges of his mouth were torn and mangled.

"Oh!" she cried. "How cruel!" she faced the man suddenly with wide, accusing eyes. "How simply—beastly!"

Without comment he returned her gaze coolly, but she observed that his heavy black brows were drawn together in a frown. Then the sorrel, ears pricked forward, lowered his head and sniffed delicately at her still lifted hand. She looked into his liquid, intelligent eyes and caught her breath in a little, half sob.

"Why, he 's—he 's a—pet!" she exclaimed. "How could anybody——"

She broke off abruptly. The man had turned his back on her and was busy cinching up the saddle. When he had adjusted it to his satisfaction he faced around.

"I reckon that 'll carry yuh home, ma'am," he remarked in a cool, impersonal tone.

She flushed, hesitated, and then moved quickly forward.

"Thank you," she said stiffly. "I 'm sorry to have troubled you so much."

Thumbs hooked in his chap-belt, he stood motionless while she turned the stirrup and swung herself into the saddle. The cool, lazy regard of those dark eyes under the drooping lids deepened

the flush in her cheeks, and, gathering up the reins, she hastened to turn her mount.

"Good-by," she said coldly over one shoulder.

He answered as briefly, with a perfunctory movement of one hand to his hat-brim, and she urged her pony forward. She had not meant to glance back. Indeed, nothing was further from her intention. But as her horse reached the edge of the slope he slowed down and, with ears pricked cautiously forward, took the first downward step or two sidewise like a crab. Thus slewed around, Anne, out of the corner of her eye, caught a fleeting glimpse of the man who had helped her out of an unpleasant predicament, yet whom she felt she hated.

He stood where she had left him, still staring after her. One hand was caught negligently in his chap-belt; the other— She could scarcely believe the evidence of her senses, but certainly the sorrel had moved forward, thrusting his shapely head over the fellow's shoulder. And in that brief instant before the jutting cliff had blotted out the picture it looked very much as if that other hand was occupied in a slow, gentle stroking of the velvet nozzle!

CHAPTER II

HORSE-THIEF!

THE girl was at first amazed and then frankly incredulous in the reality of that fleeting vision. Guiding her mount down the rough descent, she told herself that she must have been mistaken. There had been no time to see properly, and something probably in the position of man and horse had deceived her.

"He 's nothing but a great, hulking brute to treat a horse that way!" she reflected angrily. "A perfect darling, too, with a lot of breeding in him."

She spoke with emphasis and conviction, for if there was one thing on earth that Anne loved and understood it was a good horse. With her horses were a passion, and, until that terrible time three months ago when her whole world had toppled about her like a ruined house of cards, there had always been one, and sometimes two of them, in the stables back of that attractive, sunny, sub-

urban home that she and her father occupied so happily together.

The unexpected financial crash that preceded his sudden death and the total ruin that followed had left her numb. She gave up the house, the pretty furnishings, the motor-car, if not without a qualm, at least without tears. For in the face of her bereavement none of these things seemed to matter. But when it came to parting with her roan, Firefly, something seemed to break within her. Even to this day a sob came into her throat as she remembered the feel of his satiny coat against her tear-wet face, the gentle thrust of his velvet nozzle at her close-pressed shoulder, the troubled look in his dear eyes as she stumbled out of the stable with averted face. She would almost rather have seen him dead than sold to some callous stranger. But he was one of the "assets" in the bankrupt estate, and she could only hope and pray that at least he had met with decent treatment. Suppose he had fallen into the hands of some creature like the man back there on the mountain-side!

It did not bear thinking of, and Anne strove resolutely to forget the whole unpleasant episode. She succeeded for a time, the roughness of the gulch forcing her to give all her attention to guid-

ing the cow-pony. But when she emerged into the main trail that crossed the mountains through Crater Notch and turned toward home she suddenly found herself thinking of a pair of bold black eyes set in a tight-lipped, strong young face that was dark, almost as any Indian's, and wondering whether that swarthiness was natural or the result of a lifetime spent under biting winds and scorching Rocky Mountain suns.

"Bother!" she exclaimed petulantly when she realized how her mind was running. "What earthly difference does it make to me who or what he is? I 'm not likely to see him again—I hope!"

But did she altogether hope quite that? Anne tried always to be honest with herself, and before she had reached the boundary of her uncle's ranch, the Double Circle, she was forced to admit that though she hated the stranger for his brutal treatment of the horse there was something about the fellow which—interested her.

To begin with, he was the first *different* human being she had set eyes on since her arrival in this primitive, inaccessible range country nearly three weeks before. The two cow-men on the Double Circle were both well along toward forty and rather dull—men whose minds, she told herself, traveled in a rut. It was much the same thing

with the few neighbors—she had found it difficult to class as neighbors people living fifteen miles and more away—who had drifted into the shabby, down-at-the-heel old ranch-house. They were pleasant enough and kindly, and it was n't that Anne could find nothing to interest her in simple people. But, like the two cow-men, there were no mental depths to explore. In ten minutes one had plumbed their minds to the bottom and was able to predict accurately what their thoughts and reactions would be in almost any situation. Not one of them was the sort to do anything startling or unexpected.

Anne never, of course, betrayed such feelings by as much as the blink of an eyelash. She treated her uncle's friends with unfailing tact and consideration, listened to them with attentive patience, and honestly tried to interest herself in their doings. And almost always after they had gone she would chide herself bitterly for a beastly, ungrateful wretch. What right had she to be dissatisfied and bored and lonely? What right had she to criticize even in her mind, as she sometimes did, George Sherwood's shiftless, easy-going ways when he had taken her in penniless and given her this refuge? Above all, what did she want with startling or unexpected human qualities, she,

whose father had been in his grave a scant three months?

It was this mood that suddenly took possession of her as she rode through the sagging, broken gate and approached the ranch-house. This occupied the summit of a gently rising knoll—a low, sprawling building of logs and rough timber, weathered, almost decayed in places, its wide extent eloquent of days when the Double Circle had been a prosperous and crowded outfit. At present there was an air of untidy forlornness about the place which disturbed Anne every time she came back to it from the wild, clean wilderness of rock and forest. She felt it now, but swiftly checked her unuttered criticism and rode on to where her uncle lounged, with two companions, in the shade of a big Douglas fir beside the kitchen door.

Pleasantly, with her unconsciously attractive and faintly wistful smile, she greeted Sandy Crutcher, the man she knew, and acknowledged her uncle's casual presentation of the stranger, "Pinch Gritling, fo'man o' Hanby's, over by Loon Lake."

"I 'm rather glad you spend most of your time at Hanby's," she apostrophized under her breath as she took in with a swift, appraising glance the

narrow, brown, tight-lipped face with pale-blue eyes set too close to a prominent nose.

And in the very act of exchanging a politely casual remark or two with them there was room in the back of her mind for a momentary feeling of whimsical annoyance at her inconsistency. If she was any judge at all of human nature here was a man with a hair-trigger mind, whose probable actions no one on earth was likely to foresee and yet she began by disliking him!

"By the way, uncle," she said as she gathered up her reins intending to ride around to the corral. "I 'm afraid I 'll have to have a new cinch."

"New cinch?" drawled George Sherwood. "What 's the matter with that 'un. Looks good to me?"

"It broke back there in the mountains. It 's only laced together now."

With a grunt, the rancher heaved up his rather fleshy body and peered beneath the horse's belly.

"Yuh never did that piece o'work, Annie," he commented, looking up at the girl in surprise. "That 's a reg'lar cow-man's job."

The girl colored faintly. "I could have done as good a job if I 'd only had the materials," she protested. "As a matter of fact, it *was* a cowboy

who helped me out—at least he was dressed like one."

"Who was he?"

"I don't know. I met him just at the top of a little gulch about a mile off the Crater Notch trail. He was riding a bright sorrel with a lighter mane and tail that had been horribly treated." Her eyes flashed indignation at the remembrance of the animal's condition. "There were dreadful welts all over him, and his mouth——"

She broke off, surprised at the curious change in her uncle's face. His faded eyes widened suddenly and grew keen; the rather slack jaw tightened, and his lips parted swiftly as if for speech. But after all it was Gritling who broke the momentary silence.

"What 'd he look like?" he demanded curtly.

The girl turned slowly and looked at him with an unconscious tilt of her shapely chin and a drooping of her long-lashed lids. Back in the old vanished sunlit days her friends had often joked about "Anne's haughty stare," and the way it signally put down the familiarity or presumption of some new-comer to the little coterie.

"He was very big and broad and—dark," she said with cool deliberation. "His hair and eyes were black, and——"

"Drummond, by cripesticks!" exclaimed Sandy Crutcher excitedly. "That 's him to a T."

"It sure is!" agreed George Sherwood with unwonted animation. "How about it, Grit?"

Gritling did not answer for a moment, but Anne, watching him, saw his cold eyes blaze suddenly with an expression of keen, cruel satisfaction. It was a curiously secret look, vanishing almost as swiftly as it had come and leaving him unchanged save for a slight tightening of his thin lips and a barely noticeable stiffening of his spare frame. Somehow Anne found that brief evidence of extraordinary self-repression oddly disconcerting.

"Sounds like it to me," he commented briefly. "Jest whereabouts was it yuh saw him, miss?"

Instead of answering, Anne turned swiftly to her uncle.

"Who is he?" she asked quickly. "What—what has he—done?"

Sherwood frowned. "He 's a dawg-goned hoss-thief; that 's what he is," he retorted impatiently. "Stole that sorrel off 'n Hanby last night as bare-faced as yuh please, an' made his get-away. Grit come over to see if he 'd shown up around here. Where was it yuh saw him? Let 's have it quick, an' don't be holdin' back anythin' 'count o' his bein' such a han'some scoundrel."

A wave of crimson flamed into Anne's face and she bit her lips. How dare he say such a thing? It was coarse, common—hateful!

Her voice a trifle unsteady with mingled anger and indignation, she gave the information in curt brief sentences, answered a question or two, and then turned her horse toward the corral. The men's staccato voices drifted after her.

"Looks like there 's a chance of our catchin' him if we hustle," Sandy Crutcher was saying excitedly.

"Y' betcha," agreed Sherwood. "Get yore two men, Grit; they 're down at the bunk-house, I reckon. I 'll round up Buck an' Irish, an' we 'll go. We 'll show Dirk Drummond he can't pull off this kind of thing around here an' get away with it."

Beyond a curt agreement, Gritling had little to say, but he made up for his taciturnity by swift and purposeful action. By the time Anne had turned her pony into the corral and hung up saddle and bridle in the shed, Sherwood had routed out his men, Apgar and McKenna, and the three were saddling up with uncommon expedition. Crutcher, already mounted, watched the process with ill concealed impatience from outside the corral, while Gritling, standing beside his

horse a little further off, was talking in a low rapid tone with two strange cow-men whom he had evidently brought with him.

Anne did not linger there but walked rapidly back toward the ranch-house. She had scarcely reached the corner of the building before the seven riders swept past her amid a cloud of dust and thudded toward the gate. With a troubled frown the girl watched them swing around into the trail, and as they disappeared she gave a little sigh.

CHAPTER III

CAPTIVE

"WHAT 'S all the fuss about?" suddenly demanded a sharp voice behind the girl. "Whatever do they mean chasin' off like that with dinner jest about ready to dish up?"

Anne turned to find Mrs. Pritchard, the middle-aged, sharp-visaged cook and general housekeeper standing beside her, and in a few words acquainted her with what had happened.

"Yuh don't say!" exclaimed the elder woman, sucking in her breath. She was small and wiry, a widow of years standing and an inveterate gossip. "Horse-thievin', eh?" Her eyes brightened with interest. "Wal! wal! Ain't been nothin' like that around these parts in quite some while. I mind the time, though, when it wa' n't nothin' uncommon. More 'n once I 've seen——"

"Do you know this man—er—Drummond?" interrupted Anne abruptly.

"Wa-al, not what yuh might call pers'nally,

no,'' admitted Mrs. Pritchard with evident regret. ''Hanby's Bar Two is a right smart ways off, an' he ain't been there but about a year. He used to live in Painted Post, though, an' I 've seen him there more 'n once; big, dark, showy critter—han'some enough if yuh like them kind, but uncertain. I ain't partial to 'em myself, preferrin' a small man like my late husband. They ain't so hard to manage.''

But Anne was n't interested just now in the late lamented Pritchard, of whom she had already heard numerous anecdotes from his better half, as well as the current rumor that this capable person had successfully ''managed'' him into an early grave. So she made an excuse of having to brush up after her ride, and sought her room.

At dinner, to which the two women presently sat down in lonely state, Mrs. Pritchard's conversation ranged as usual over a wide variety of subjects. Her mind, however, seemed chiefly burdened with the calamity of a good dinner wasted. ''Dumplin's, too, m' dear, with hard sauce, that yore uncle dotes on,'' was the special keynote of her plaint.

Anne was rather glad when the meal was over and she could get off by herself for a while. At the farther end of the valley, almost within sight

of the ranch-house, was a secluded little grove where the brawling of a mountain brook and the sound of the wind in the pines made pleasant soothing music. She had planned to retire there with a book, but when she got to her room the idea seemed to have lost its savor, and a sudden determination to tidy up the ranch-house took possession of her.

She knew beforehand that it was an impossible task for one afternoon, but she attacked it briskly, hoping that the occupation would help to rid her mind of the memory of that morning's unpleasant encounter and its more than unpleasant sequel.

A horse-thief! Curiously enough, though she had cried out mentally against this Drummond for his cruelty, that possibility had not occurred to her. Even now it did not seem reasonable. Brutal he might be and even savage, but he had not struck her as the sort of man to do anything underhand or mean. His eyes, steady, smoldering, baffling in their impenetrable reserve, had nothing furtive or evasive about them. His manner was not the manner of a criminal.

And yet there seemed no doubt whatever of his guilt. Not only Gritling but George Sherwood had instantly recognized her description of the sorrel, and from the former's account both man

and horse had evidently disappeared from Hanby's ranch together. Moreover, Anne could not forget that swift drawing of his weapon as she appeared on the rocky shoulder of the mountain and the stealthy replacing of it when he recognized her. Surely this was the action of a hunted man.

"Oh dear!" she murmured, mechanically stacking together a lot of tattered magazines on the cluttered living-room table. "I don't know what to think. I wish I had n't got mixed up in the beastly business."

As the afternoon wore slowly away and she moved restlessly from room to room making an effort—which sometimes became rather perfunctory—to reduce the untidy chaos to some sort of order, her mind continued to circle around the subject. At one moment she was certain of Drummond's guilt; at another the conviction would come over her that he was innocent, or at least that there must be some extenuating circumstances, if there ever could be extenuating circumstances to an open theft. But in the end she was no more really certain of herself than at the beginning.

It was toward five, and Anne was brushing up her uncle's office, a corner room at the opposite end of the building from the kitchen, when the

sound of hoofs brought her swiftly to the front window. The glass was dingy, and for an instant she stared undecided at the bunch of riders approaching from the gate. Then her heart gave a sudden jump.

"They 've got him!" she whispered tensely.

Motionless beside the window, the forgotten duster trailing from one hand, she watched them come steadily nearer. Her eyes were riveted on the tall figure astride the sorrel, and presently she realized that his hands seemed to be tied behind his back. How had they managed to capture him, she wondered, without any loss to themselves? Even with her limited Western experience, she felt somehow that a man of that type would resist violently—would shoot, and even shoot to kill. What had held his hand? What, too, did they mean to do with him, now that he was in their power? He would be turned over to the law, she supposed, but would they take him to prison or keep him here until some official came to get him?

These and a dozen other questions flashed through the girl's mind, mingling with a dull, troubled sense of regret at the turn events had taken. Then all at once she realized that the horsemen were headed toward the office door.

"Oh!" she gasped, darting away from the window. "I must n't stay here! I can't—see him."

Dropping the duster, she fled into the hall and flew toward her room. At the door, however, she paused, dominated by a very natural curiosity to know what was going to happen next.

She heard the office door bang open and a volume of hoarse male voices surged through the corridor. Suddenly her uncle's strident tones rose above the others.

"Annie! Ann-ie! Where the dickens did she go to? Hustle up, girl!"

Anne started nervously and her eyes widened. Her first impulse was to slip into her room and shut the door. Then, as her uncle's summons came again, impatient, imperative, her slim figure stiffened, and she bit her lips. A moment later she was moving down the hall toward the office.

"Oh, there yuh are," said her uncle as she appeared. "Get some iodine and bandages and hot water; that 's a good girl. They 're in a box on my bureau or mebbe I left the iodine in the kitchen. The scoundrel 's shot Hooper through the shoulder."

Anne's startled eyes rested for an instant on one of the strange cow-punchers who stood beside

Gritling over by the open door. His shirt had been cut away at the shoulder, which was crudely bandaged with a colored neckerchief, while another did duty as a sling. Save for her uncle, the rest of the men were gathered in a group on the other side of the room. Anne purposely refrained from glancing that way as she hurried off.

She found the bandages in her uncle's room and the iodine in the kitchen and returned as quickly as she could, followed by Mrs. Pritchard with a basin of water. The injured man was seated in a chair looking white and a little faint. He had evidently lost considerable blood, and as Anne, like most girls of her generation, had a very fair knowledge of first aid, she set to work at once without asking questions or waiting for suggestions.

As her fingers moved deftly and gently, cleansing and sterilizing the wound, binding it up with pads and antiseptic gauze, she was aware of Gritling's steady scrutiny and vaguely resented it. She tried to ignore the man and fix her mind solely on what she was doing, but found it difficult. The hubbub in the room, too, was distracting. Several of the men were talking at once, and Mrs. Pritchard's shrill, incessant chatter rose high above their gruffer voices. Anne had a momentary

vicious wish that somebody would strangle her. But she managed to restrain herself, and despite the various annoyances she succeeded at length in completing a very creditable piece of work. As she straightened up and gathered together the remains of the gauze and other paraphernalia, Gritling spoke for the first time.

"Looks like a reg'lar, professional job," he commented. "Yuh must of worked in a hospital."

The words were entirely inoffensive, but there was something about his tone she did not fancy.

"It will do for the time," she told him coldly. "I 'd suggest you take him away from this racket and put him to bed."

Without waiting for an answer, she turned away and started for the door. To the left of it stood a little group of three, Irish McKenna, the second of Gritling's cow-punchers, and—Dirk Drummond!

The latter, hands still tied behind him, leaned negligently against the wall, and as she paused Anne could not well help looking at him.

It was like a slap in the face, that steady, heavy-lidded, contemptuous stare—the dark eyebrows lifted, the hard lips curled sneeringly. Anne felt the hot color flame into her face, and her teeth grated.

"Insolent!" she breathed passionately when she had gained the hall. "How dare he? He looked——" She broke off abruptly, a sudden, hateful possibility flashing into her mind. "Oh!" she gasped. "He thinks that I—that I deliberately—told."

Her indignation scarcely lessened, but when she reached her room and sat down to think it over she was forced to admit that there was a good deal of reason for such a point of view. From the way events had fallen it might look very much as if she had flown to spread the news of the outlaw's whereabouts the instant he had finished repairing that broken cinch.

"But he must have *known* I had no idea who he was!" she said aloud. "How was I to tell he was —was—wanted? Besides—" she tossed her head —"anybody ought to inform on a criminal."

She spoke vehemently and positively, but it was more from the hurt anger of wounded self-esteem than from any real conviction. Down in her heart she knew that had she been aware of all the circumstances not a word of that encounter would ever have passed her lips. He had helped her out of a bad predicament, and, thief or not, to reward him by a cowardly betrayal, was n't Anne's notion of what was right and decent.

She stayed in her room until a sense of duty forced her to the kitchen to help Mrs. Pritchard prepare for the extra company at supper. She had scarcely crossed the threshold when she was surprised to see Gritling ride past the window on his way toward the gate.

"Are n't they going to stay for supper?" she asked.

"All but him, dearie," nodded Mrs. Pritchard. "He 's off to fetch Hanby an' the rest of the men that are huntin' the villain over beyond Painted Post."

"Oh!" said Anne. She turned to the cupboard and began taking out the coarse, chipped crockery. "I dare say he 'll notify the sheriff, too," she added slowly. "He—he 'll be sent to prison, I suppose."

The widow glanced at her oddly. "Prison!" she ejaculated. "Laws! Nothin' like that m' dear."

"I—I don't understand," the girl said in surprise. "I thought that—horse-stealing was considered——"

She hesitated, puzzled. Mrs. Pritchard slapped a thick steak into the big frying-pan and then turned to her.

"Yuh thought right, dearie," she stated briskly.

"Around these parts—yuh might say in most any cattle country—there ain't a worse crime, unless mebbe rustlin'. A pretty thing it would be if folks could trapse around pickin' up any horse they had a mind to. Honest ranchers would soon be bankrupt. It ain't to be thought of, an', believe me, this here Drummond knew full well the chances he was takin' when he done it."

An odd, tingling sense of foreboding went through Anne as she set a pile of dishes on the table.

"But you said—they would n't—send him to prison," she murmured.

"Nor will they," retorted the widow grimly. "He was caught with the goods, an' he 'll be made an example of. Hanby an' Gritling ain't the kind of men to be monkeyed with. The sheriff 's thirty miles away, an' there 's plenty of trees an' good rope handy by. Many 's the time I 've knowed——"

"Mrs. Pritchard!" gasped Anne, her face white, her wide eyes full of startled, incredulous horror. "You don't mean—You can't mean that they're going to—to——"

"Why not?" returned Mrs. Pritchard doggedly. "That was the way in the old days, an' things ain't changed a powerful lot around these parts.

When there ain't much law, so to speak, yuh gotta make yore own. When Drummond run off that sorrel he done it with his eyes open."

Anne caught the edge of the table to steady herself. The woman's words seemed unreal, incredible, and yet they turned her cold.

"But to—to murder a man for that!" she cried. "You can't mean it! My uncle—— Surely he would never allow such a dreadful thing!"

The widow turned quickly to her steak, realizing, perhaps, that her love of gossip had led her into an indiscretion.

"Mebbe not, dearie," she soothed hastily. Mebbe I 'm just judgin' by the way things used to be done. There 's no sense takin' on so about it. Likely Gritling 'll send word to the sher-uff from Painted Post after all. Yuh go on settin' the table and don't fret."

But Anne, quick to catch a subtle undercurrent in the woman's voice, felt that she was being put off like a child who threatens to become embarrassing. She remembered an expression she had caught once or twice in Gritling's face—hard, cruel, pitiless—and fear seared through her soul like a white-hot iron. For if Mrs. Pritchard's prediction was true, she felt that she herself would be stamped for ever with the brand of a Delilah.

CHAPTER IV

IN THE NIGHT-WATCHES

HOT-EYED, head throbbing, every nerve in her slim, young body raw and tingling, Anne Sherwood sat rigid, staring into the darkness of her bedroom, trying desperately to think. She had been sitting here for hours—endless, interminable hours they seemed. Morning would soon be here, she felt, and had a ghastly conviction that the slanting sunlight streaming through uncurtained windows would find her still there, as impotently helpless, as horror-stricken, as fearful of what that new day was likely to bring, yet utterly powerless to prevent it or even stave it off as when she had dropped into the chair the night before.

From the kitchen she had flown to her uncle with protests that were almost hysteric. It was true that he vehemently denied the rumor, cursing Mrs. Pritchard for a garrulous, lying fool, telling the girl that such a thing was ridiculous.

He admitted that in the past men had frequently been lynched for horse-stealing, but that sort of thing, he said, was frowned on by all the decent ranchers. Gritling had merely gone to town to send word to the sheriff at Ogden to come and get the prisoner. Drummond would be tried and convicted with due process of law, and spend a few years behind the bars like any other thief. It was absurd of her to get all worked up over nothing, but he supposed that was the natural result of her bringing up. So many Easterners seemed to believe everything they read or heard about the West.

From the first Anne did not believe him. In the very beginning that brief instant of startled, angry surprise had not escaped her. And when he began his soothing explanations he did not look her in the eyes. He was too glib and ready, too verbose, too eager to quiet her fears to be natural, and she felt certain that he was lying.

She kept on pleading until suddenly he flew into a rage and roughly ordered her to go away and mind her own business. He had never spoken to her like that before, and his manner confirmed the girl's growing conviction that this horror she had felt so incredible was really true.

She left him, her heart filled with a mingling

of indignation and fear and numbing helplessness. An appeal to any of the other men would, she felt, be futile. They would merely refer her to Sherwood or to Gritling, and if she had failed to move her uncle she knew he would be hopeless.

Leaving the house, she went out into the swiftly falling darkness and for an hour or more walked aimlessly about trying to think of some possible means whereby the catastrophe might be averted. But the only result of her desperate searchings was a feeling of even greater impotence and helplessness. Surrounded all her life by the comforts and safe-guards of an urban civilization, where, in an emergency, a telephone-call brings an officer hurrying to the door, it was small wonder that she found herself at a loss. There was no telephone. The sheriff, who seemed to be the only representative of law in this wild place, was quite out of reach. She thought once or twice of riding to one of the neighbors with her plea. But gradually the realization was being borne in upon her that this thing which seemed so horrible to her was regarded from quite a different point of view by the men who had grown up amid the risks and dangers of a remote, primitive cattle country. They would almost surely decline to interfere, especially against Jeff Hanby, of whose power and

influence in the district Anne had already heard a vague rumor.

Discouraged, almost frantic, she turned back at length to the ranch-house. She had almost reached the door when, moved by a sudden impulse she turned aside and walked swiftly over to the front window of the office. The room was lighted by an oil lamp set on her uncle's flat-topped desk, and beside it, lounging in a chair, was Wagner, the second of Gritling's cow-punchers, six-shooter within easy reach. In another chair across the room sat the prisoner, and as the girl saw that his feet as well as hands were tied securely her heart sank and she moved quickly away.

They were evidently taking no risks, she thought, as she sought her room. Trussed up like that, with a man to guard him, Drummond had not a chance in ten thousand of making his escape.

Sitting there in the darkness of her room, Anne thought of him ceaselessly, and a score of times there flashed into her mind a vivid picture of the man waiting there helpless for what the coming day was bringing. Pitifully she wondered what lay behind that cool, composed, slightly scornful mask she had studied through the window. He must know what was in store for him, and Anne

could imagine something of the bitter rebellion against fate, the rage and fury, the impotent sense of helplessness that seethed through his active mind during those interminable hours of waiting. Did he look backward with regret? Or forward with perhaps a momentary little shiver to——

Abruptly the girl's taut, tortured nerves snapped, and with a stifled sob she sprang to her feet.

"I can't bear it!" she gasped, her fingers interlacing frantically. "I simply—can't—bear it!"

For an instant she stood motionless, fighting for self-control. Then she went over to her bureau and feeling for a little electric flash-light, pressed the button and looked at her watch. To her amazement it was only a trifle after one.

Again she hesitated briefly and then walked over to the door. She did not open it, however, but after a momentary pause she turned and crossed to the window. She had taken off her dress and put on a dainty, lace-trimmed negligée, and her loosened hair hung about her shoulders in waves and cascades of pale gold. Otherwise she was fully dressed, and as she stood looking out into the still darkness, faintly luminous under the stars, a sudden determination came over her. Less than thirty seconds later she had slipped

through the window and was moving swiftly along the side of the building toward the corner.

She was dominated by no special hope. It was more a feeling that she could not remain quiet another moment. But when she reached the wide window of the office and peered cautiously around an edge of the casing, a little tingle of surprise went through her.

The guard had evidently been changed, for it was Buck Apgar who occupied the chair beside the desk. His gun lay ready to his hand, but, unlike Wagner, Apgar's head drooped forward and he was palpably dozing!

A sudden thrill went over Anne and, venturing to move closer, she looked around for Drummond. She was surveying the room from a window placed at right angles to the one she had looked through earlier in the evening, and for a moment or two she failed to see the prisoner at all. Then all at once she discovered that he was stretched out at full length on the floor directly beneath the window-sill.

He lay on his back, hands beneath him and feet still tied securely. His eyes were wide open, and as he met the girl's amazed stare an expression of startled surprise flashed into their somber depths.

Anne drew back swiftly into the sheltering darkness and stood there, hands clasped together tightly and heart beating wildly. Another moment and she was speeding back toward her room.

Scrambling through the open window she snatched up her torch and, flashing the circle of light over the dresser, pounced on a pearl-handled knife that lay there—the knife she had forgotten to take with her yesterday. It was a dainty thing, but not quite so useless as the delicate toys women usually own. Anne had bought it mainly because of the curved steel hook fashioned to remove stones from horses' hoofs. But there was also a serviceable two-inch blade, and that blade was sharp.

With this in her hand she got out of the window again and started back toward the office. But part way she paused abruptly. Drummond lay in such a position that by drawing herself up into the window she could reach forward and cut his bonds. Her intention had been to release him in this way without losing a moment, but now she realized all at once that the situation was not quite so simple.

Without means of getting away, his position would still be hazardous. At any moment Apgar might wake and, finding the prisoner gone, would

promptly raise the alarm and an instant pursuit would follow. On foot Drummond might escape for a time, but without a horse it would be difficult if not impossible for him to get very far away. The whole country was sure to be roused, and his ultimate capture would be almost certain.

"Oh!" murmured the girl in dismay. "I never thought of that at all."

CHAPTER V

ANNE GREATLY DARES

PERPLEXED and troubled, Anne hesitated, her thoughts flying to the stolen sorrel. Would it be possible, she wondered, for *her* to catch and saddle the beast without being detected? Back on the mountain-side he had seemed uncommonly gentle, but Anne was enough of a horsewoman to realize the futility of predicting what an animal's behavior will be under unusual circumstances. Even the best trained cow-ponies are invariably caught with a rope and are likely to be frightened by any change in the regular method. The girl had no ability whatever in that line, and as she considered the prospect her heart sank.

There seemed, however, to be nothing to do but make the attempt, for she felt more and more convinced that it was the only way. A little delay in releasing Drummond would do no harm. Apgar was unlikely to become more wakeful as the night

wore on; indeed, the chances were quite the other way. And if she failed with the horse Anne could always fall back on her original plan. So she turned once more and, skirting the house, sped toward the corral where she felt sure the sorrel must have been left.

As the bars of the inclosure loomed up in the starlight, she glanced apprehensively toward the bunk-house less than a hundred yards away. Then, remembering that McKenna, who must be there alone to-night, was an uncommonly sound sleeper, she took heart and moved slowly along the high fence searching for a saddle.

Presently she found two slung carelessly over the rail, and, picking out one that had a bridle twisted around the horn, she lifted it down and carried it back to the corral gate. She placed this on the ground, and, loosening the gate-catch, stepped quietly into the inclosure.

Clad all in white, her loosened hair forming a golden halo about her face, she made a striking picture as she moved slowly and silently toward the corner where the horses were gathered in a drowsing group. Unused to women in any guise, it was small wonder that one of them scrambled up with a frightened snort and sped toward the further side of the corral. The others, startled

by his action and by the discovery of this strange human being in their midst, thudded after him with much snorting and tossing of heads.

To Anne the noise seemed fairly thunderous. She halted instantly, heart in her throat, and glanced apprehensively toward the dark bulk of the bunk-house. It seemed incredible that McKenna could sleep through that appalling racket. She expected at any moment to have him come out to find what was the matter and desperately searched her mind for some possible excuse for her presence here. But as the minutes passed without a sign of him she began to breathe more easily. At length she turned and started cautiously after the horses again.

As before when she was within twenty feet these scudded off. But one of them, having gone a dozen strides, slowed down and turned his head toward her curiously. Though she could not see him distinctly, there was something about his poise and the shape of his head that made Anne almost sure he was the sorrel. She took a step or two forward, making soothing little sounds in her throat, and presently discovered that she was right.

The horse stirred uneasily as she continued that slow approach, but did not back away. At

length Anne reached his side. And, still soothing him with soft murmurs, she lifted one hand and gently stroked his neck.

"You darling!" she whispered, a little catch in her voice. "I knew you were a pet. . . . I don't believe it was he at all who treated you so cruelly."

The sorrel nudged her gently with his velvet nozzle, and somehow that touch seemed to undermine for an instant the girl's hard-won self-control. With a stifled sob she pressed her face close against her neck, and one hand stole up, her fingers twining caressingly in his crisp, luxuriant mane. When she raised her head a moment later her eyes were wet.

"We must n't—do that—must we? she murmured to the horse. "There is n't—time."

Gently she turned him and started slowly toward the gate, still holding him lightly by the mane. He came with her readily enough, and presently she had him outside the inclosure with the gate shut behind them.

"I believe you *know*—what 's happened," she whispered, catching up the bit. "Your poor mouth," she went on, adjusting it with deft gentleness. "I 'm trying to be very careful. There! Now for the saddle."

How she blessed her early training as she lifted this to his back and swiftly and dexterously adjusted straps and buckles! Few cow-punchers could have done the thing more expertly, and in an incredibly short time she was leading the saddled horse across the open space at the rear of the ranch-house.

Despite an almost irresistible desire to make haste, she forced herself to move slowly and cautiously, picking her way with care. She could not count on her uncle and the others in the house being such sound sleepers as McKenna. A stumble on the part of the sorrel, even the jingle of his bit, might ruin everything. More than once before she reached a little clump of trees to one side of the house and about a hundred feet away Anne's heart was in her throat.

Even when she had tied the sorrel to a slim cottonwood and recovered the knife from her window-ledge, the tension did not relax. Suppose Apgar had come out of his doze and was wide-awake? Or, for all she knew, the guard might have been changed again. To fail now would be worse than tragic, and as she reached the window Anne's heart was thudding loudly, and for a long moment she actually hesitated, reluctant to learn the worst.

The reaction, when she discovered Apgar—legs stretched out before him, chin resting on his breast—in even deeper slumber than before was almost overwhelming. She caught her breath; the color flamed into her face, and her blue eyes sparkled. As she opened the knife and laid it on the sill, her fingers shook a little, but there was no further sign of nervousness.

The window-ledge was nearly four feet from the ground, and by standing on tiptoe Anne was just able to thrust her head over the sill. Drummond lay in much the same position as before, and as their glances met his eyes widened and a sudden gleam of hope flashed into them.

Hastily Anne touched her lips with one finger. Then she showed him the knife and made an expressive gesture with one arm through the open window. The man nodded comprehendingly, and as Anne drew back she saw that he was beginning to turn over with slow, cautious movements of his big body.

She waited breathlessly, eyes fixed intently on the sleeping guard. When she looked down again Drummond lay on his face, his bound wrists uppermost.

Anne drew a long breath. The crucial moment had come. There was an instant of chilling, ner-

vous apprehension lest she should blunder, but she put the thought from her swiftly. She must not fail.

Gripping the ledge with both hands, she placed a foot on the round of the bottom log and drew herself noiselessly up into the opening. The floor was not much more than two feet lower than the window, and so it was not necessary actually to step into the room. By bending well forward she could reach Drummond's shackled hands and feet, and without losing a moment she did so.

His wrists had been tied expertly, as only a cowman or a sailor can do it, with a length of tough, flexible rope and in addition a strip of rawhide, both drawn so tightly that they fairly cut into the skin. This was so raw and chafed that Anne wondered, as she worked rapidly with her knife, whether Drummond had not been making desperate but unavailing attempts to free himself. It would be unlike him to lie absolutely quiescent.

Strand by strand the rope parted. The rawhide was tougher, and Anne was afraid to press too hard for fear of cutting him. But at last that, too, yielded, and the girl edged her slim body along the window-sill and attacked the fastenings about his ankles.

She dared not glance toward Apgar, dared not

even think of him. It was a moment for speed and dexterity and cautious silence. The tenseness of the situation, coupled with her position, drove the blood into her face a crimson flood; her loosened hair fell over her eyes, half blinding her. But her hand was steady, and she never ceased the swift, nervous slicing of her knife. When the last strand had parted, however, and she dropped back through the window, a sudden dizziness came over her, and she was forced to grasp at the rough wall to keep herself from staggering.

It was only a momentary weakness. Quickly pulling herself together, she watched with breathless eagerness Drummond's swift yet cautious movements. Gripping the window-ledge, he drew himself upright without so much as the creaking of a board. For an instant he stood there wavering a little on feet which must have been numbed and cramped and bloodless. Then he bent down and, gathering up the bits of rope and rawhide, thrust them into his pocket. His hat lay on the floor near-by, and, catching that up, he slipped through the window and stood beside the girl.

Not daring to speak aloud, Anne touched his arm and pointed through the darkness toward the grove. He nodded, and as she moved forward he kept beside her with only the suspicion of a limp.

Presently the outline of the horse loomed up through the shadows, ears pricked forward, head turned in their direction. An instant later the man caught his breath sharply.

"It is n't——Jerry?" he muttered hoarsely.

"Yes," she whispered. "I—got him out. I knew you 'd have to——"

"So that 's what yuh were doing all the time," he said in a queer voice. "An' I thought yuh 'd gone an'——"

"Gone away and left you?" she finished, as he hesitated. "It must have looked that way. When I first saw Apgar asleep I meant to try and get you loose at once. Then I realized that he might wake up any time and find you gone before you had time to saddle up. You—you ought to go at once. If you lead your horse as far as the gate——"

She paused uncertainly. He made no effort to follow her suggestion, but stood looking down on her, an odd expression in his darkly handsome face.

"I 'm wonderin', ma'am, just why yuh done this for me?" he said briefly.

She stared, flushing slightly. "Why?" she repeated blankly. "You would n't ask that if you knew what they meant to—to do——"

"They were aimin' to string me up, I reckon," he put in coolly. "Grit ain't lovin' me overmuch, an' Hanby——" He finished with a shrug.

"Well, is n't that enough? Can't you see how I felt when I heard? It—it was too awful to think of! I blamed myself. I—I spoke of meeting you. I had no idea—— It was my fault, really, that they—caught you." Her voice quivered. "Can't you imagine how I 'd have felt if—if——"

She faltered and grew silent under his steady, searching scrutiny. His lips had softened; his dark eyes, big and luminous in the bright starlight, were fixed intently on her face. She wondered with a sudden breathlessness how she could ever have thought them hard and cruel. Suddenly he reached out and caught one of her hands in his brown, muscular fingers.

"I did n't know there was a girl—anywhere—who 'd have done what yuh did," he said with an odd gentleness. "There ain't words—coined to —to thank yuh proper. Yuh done it, too, believin' I 'd stole Jerry, an' beat him up, an'——"

"I 'm sure you did n't beat him," she interrupted swiftly.

"You 're right there, ma'am—I did n't. As for stealin' him—— Well, it was the only way I could——"

His teeth clicked together as through the window of the office there came a sudden, muffled shout. Anne gave a gasp of horror.

"Oh—go!" she cried. "Go quickly! They——"

His dark head bent swiftly, and she felt the touch of his lips against the back of her hand. An instant later he was in the saddle, reins taut, face turned toward her.

"Get into the house," he told her with cool composure. "Don't let 'em find yuh here. They might be—nasty."

"Yes—yes," she stammered. "I 'll go. Only do hurry! They must n't catch you."

"They won't—thanks to yuh."

As Anne turned and fled toward the house, he loosened the reins, and the sorrel thundered down the gentle slope leading to the gate. Suddenly, just as she reached the window, a shot rang out, wrenching a low moan from the girl's set lips. Another followed and another still, but the hoofbeats of the flying horse never faltered in their steady, rhythmic thud. Anne, crouched beside her window, with every sense concentrated in listening, followed the retreating sounds even above the shouts and turmoil of the wakening household—followed them until presently they dwindled and died away in the distance. Then and only then

did she scramble back into the dark security of her room.

A moment later she gave a little start. Her knife was gone! She tried to remember just where she had had it last, but failed. Somewhere between the office window and the cottonwoods she must have dropped that incriminating bit of evidence, which had her initials plainly graven on the handle. The ground about the ranch-house was almost bare of grass, so that the first person passing over it by daylight could scarcely fail to find the knife.

Her first impulse was to take the torch and search for it now. Then, realizing how impossible this would be with the whole household awake and scurrying about, her chin went up defiantly.

"I don't care," she said aloud. "Let them find it. I 'm not ashamed of what I did. I 'm glad he got away."

But, though she spoke with such assurance, back in a corner of her mind there remained a little canker of troubled doubt. She was not afraid of anything her uncle might say or do. She even felt that she could face the odious Gritling with indifference. But—Hanby! He was the unknown quantity, yet not entirely unknown. Though she had never met the man, she had heard certain

rumors about him that were far from reassuring. It was the recollection of some of these that made her wonder a little uneasily what his attitude would be when he arrived and found that his prisoner had flown.

CHAPTER VI

PURSUED

A FEELING of exhilaration, keen and stirring, surged through Dirk Drummond as he swung into the Crater Notch trail and galloped on through the darkness. He was free again and mounted on the sorrel for whom he had risked so much. The hum of flying bullets troubled him not at all; the certainty of swift pursuit merely added zest to the situation. They had caught him once by a trick, but he had no fear, even with this comparatively brief start, of not being able to outride them now.

During those dragging, interminable hours of captivity he had chafed incessantly under the humiliation of that capture and repented a score of times the impulse that had made him deliberately refrain from killing when he found himself surrounded. He could as well have plugged Ben Hooper in some vital spot as through the shoulder, and probably have got one or two others before

cashing in himself. But now he was rather pleased that he had held his hand. Gritling was the only one of the lot he really pined to lay low, and Gritling had prudently kept out of range behind the rocks.

Yes, as it had turned out this was the better way. He laughed aloud as he pictured the fury of both the Bar Two owner and range-boss when they arrived to find not only the prisoner gone but the sorrel also vanished.

"That 'll hit 'em hard, old fellah," he exclaimed, as he bent forward and gave the horse a gentle slap. "They 'll feel it worse than anythin' that could have happened. . . . *Some* girl, I 'll tell the world," he added fervently.

Since the moment of parting, the thought of her had never been wholly absent from his mind. He could see her now as she stood there in the starlight urging him to fly, her lovely, troubled face set in an halo of pale spun gold. Apparently from beginning to end of her surprising exploit there had been in her mind no single thought of self. With admiration Drummond considered the details of that exploit and was stirred to fresh wonder. How many men, even, would have thought it all out so cleverly and acted with such prompt courage. There were mighty few, he

knew, who would be willing to brave the certain wrath of Jed Hanby for the sake of freeing an unknown and presumably guilty horse-thief.

"She 's grit, clean through, an' darn human!" he muttered, as he sped along, the cool night wind brushing his face. "What an ornery old liar Tex Bennett is!"

This being the Bar Two puncher who, returning from Painted Post a few days ago, reported having met "that girl o' Sherwood's." He described her as "uppity an' top-lofty, chilly as an iceberg; a reg'lar Eastern lady dude, yuh might say."

Drummond snorted disgustedly, and then suddenly a hot flush burned into his face as he remembered that his own impression of the lady at that meeting on the mountain-side had been much the same.

"At that, yuh could n't blame her none for bein' a bit frosty if she saw me pull m' gun on her," he admitted. "That 's the kind of play likely to get anybody ribbed up. Well, shows yuh can't never tell about a person first off. Take it easy, ol' hoss. No sense blowin' yourself."

The trail had left the valley and was zigzagging upward toward the Notch. Presently Dirk halted the sorrel for a brief rest, and, twisting in his

saddle, he glanced back into the darkness. He could see nothing, of course, but presently the distant irregular thud of hoof-beats was wafted to him from the lower levels.

"They 're after us, fellah," he commented, his eyes sparkling. "Take yore time, though: they 're a good ways off yet."

He waited a minute or two longer before starting the sorrel again, and even then he did not press the horse. There were mighty few cow-ponies in the county, he told himself, who could overtake Jerry with a lead like this. But when he pulled up again half a mile further on the steady, ringing beat of hoofs rising clearly above the more distant clatter of the others told him that one horse at least was well in advance of the rest, and gaining on him.

"Some galoot 's tryin' to kill his cayuse," he muttered, his heavy brows arching in a puzzled way. "I wonder——"

He broke off to urge Jerry forward. They were nearing the summit of the trail, and the last half-mile rose at such a heart breaking grade that few horses could take it at more than a moderate walk. Drummond kept the sorrel to that, but all the way up the steep ascent he was aware that one

particular pursuer was steadily gaining. Suddenly he gave a sharp exclamation.

"Sufferin' Peter! Why, yuh big, thick-skulled lummox, that 's Sherwood's black stallion. No wonder he 's makin' the sparks fly. Yuh gotta stir yore stumps for shore, ol' boy."

There was little change in his expression beyond a slight tightening of his lips and a certain sharp keenness that came into his face. He kept the sorrel to the same easy pace until he reached the Notch, when he let out the reins a bit and roweled the animal gently.

But all the time he was thinking hard. Two miles beyond the summit of the trail lay the entrance to that narrow, slightly used track that led into a vast mountain wilderness to the northwest. Drummond had fully expected to reach this spot ahead of his pursuers, but the presence of George Sherwood's stallion complicated matters. He knew well the qualities of that beautiful black creature and was aware how handicapped his own mount would be after the long hard riding of the day before. It would be difficult, too, to locate the turn-off in a hurry in the darkness; and for the first time Dirk grew doubtful of his ability to follow out his plan.

"Of course I could pull over to the side o' the trail any place an' pick him off as he goes by," he reflected. "I shore don't admire the idea o'—— Hell's bells!"

His hand, thrusting automatically downward, slid smoothly across the leg of his fringed champs. Six-gun, holster, and cartridge-belt were missing.

"I clean forgot," he muttered. "O' course they took 'em off'n me." His lips twisted in a whimsical grin. "Well, mebbe it 's jest as well. It would n't hardly do to go pluggin' *her* uncle."

Behind him, the clatter of the pursuing stallion, dulled for a space by the bulk of the intervening hill, grew suddenly stronger again. Sherwood had evidently surmounted the crest and was speeding recklessly down the slope. Drummond's eyes narrowed and swept both sides of the trail searchingly.

Suddenly he turned the sorrel sharply to the right, pulled up with a jerk, and slid out of the saddle. Leading the animal up a sharp incline, he passed between two great boulders whose outlines he had noticed vaguely through the darkness, and halted. He was a good mile or more from the spot he had been heading for, but this seemed an excellent temporary refuge.

Presently, crouching in the opening between the

rocks, he saw the dark bulk of horse and rider pass swiftly. A little later four others straggled by. Drummond counted them, and when the last one had clattered out of sight he relaxed into an easier posture.

"That 's about all, I reckon," he murmured. "Hooper 's laid up, an' Grit or Chuck Wagner must have gone after Hanby. Guess I 'll make me a smoke. It 'll be an hour before it 's light enough to see my way."

Moving away from the opening, he took the sorrel's reins and felt his way to a more secluded spot a score of yards back from the trail. Here he lit a cigarette and settled down with his back against a boulder to await the coming of dawn.

When the first pale streaks of light began to creep up in the east he mounted at once and set off in a northeasterly direction. The country was exceedingly rough and broken, and he knew that it would take much longer to gain that little side-track leading to his destination than if he had been able to seek it by way of the Crater Notch trail. But it was the only way. By this time his pursuers must realize that they had passed him somewhere in the dark and would be scattering for the search. So he kept on, threading draws and gullies, pushing along wooded slopes, making

detours around especially difficult steeps or declivities, but holding always as well as he was able to the desired direction.

The sun had been up for several hours when he rode out of a shallow cañon to a rock-strewn stretch of some extent sloping gently to the north. Unfortunately the saddle Anne Sherwood had picked out was not his own, which had contained, when he was captured, a small supply of food and a nearly full canteen. For the last hour or two he had been growing increasingly thirsty, and when he caught sight of a line of green wavering along the bottom of the slope, which seemed to promise water, his eyes brightened and instinctively he touched the weary sorrel with a spur.

Suddenly a puff of smoke bellied up above a jumble of rocks about a quarter of a mile below him. Drummond threw the sorrel swiftly to one side just as a bullet whined past and clipped off a bit of rock close on his left. Dragging the horse about, he jabbed him with his spurs, the sound of the shot ringing in his ears. As he whirled back into the cañon, another bullet plowed through a clump of bunch-grass growing at its mouth.

"Ain't that a helluva note," Dirk complained drawlingly as he urged Jerry along the bottom of the cañon. "Jest when we had our mouths

fixed to lap up about a gallon o' that water, ol' hoss. Looks like the bunch must 'a' thought I 'd took that track to Bald Mountains an' chased after me. Huh!''

Hustling back over his tracks, Drummond left the cañon by the upper end, ducked into a draw running northeast, and proceeded with the utmost speed and diligence to lose himself in the wilderness of forest-covered hills lying in that direction.

CHAPTER VII

HIDDEN VALLEY

THREE days later a man, gaunt, unshaven, hollow-eyed, halted a weary sorrel on the brink of a sharp descent and looked down hungrily on the fertile valley lying beneath two jagged mountain-ranges.

Lush green meadows, bisected by the curving silver ribbon of a stream and dotted with groups of feeding cattle, clumps of willow and cottonwood with here and there darker masses of Douglas fir or more compact cedar, Hidden Valley was a sight to enchant the eye of any one, much less a half-starved fugitive like Drummond.

Full three miles wide, it stretched north and south beyond the line of vision. Here and there were lines of fencing, and from a group of trees perhaps a mile south of where Dirk sat, sagging a bit in his saddle, peeped sections of compact, well ordered ranch-buildings.

"Yuh see it, old fellah," Drummond addressed the horse who stood with ears cocked and wise

head turned toward the lovely picture. "It 's real. It ain't goin' to run away. We 've shore had one wild, rollicky time gettin' here, ain't we? But that 's over now. Let 's go."

The sorrel needed no urging. Once the reins were loosened he stepped forward and began to pick his way with dainty caution down the slope. This was not so much steep as tortuous, being, indeed, a series of rough ledges running one into the other, or connected by gullies or washouts dug by spring torrents from the heights above. Drummond guided him skilfully, his keen eye observing the ground far enough ahead to save him from having to retrace his steps more than once or twice.

At length, reaching the level ground, he turned and rode along the base of the cliffs to a point directly behind the tree-girt ranch buildings. Here he dismounted and flung the reins over the sorrel's head.

"You wait here a minute, ol'-timer," he said, running his fingers through the horse's luxuriant mane. "I 'll be back in three shakes."

He spoke exactly as if the animal could understand. The horse nudged his shoulder, nipping playfully at the shirt-sleeve, but as he moved away made no attempt to follow.

Drummond walked swiftly across to the edge of the grove, pushed through it, and paused at the outer fringe of trees. Not more than thirty feet away stood a trim, compactly built log house of moderate size, which fairly radiated neatness. There were no scattered tins or other unsightly rubbish such as disfigures the neighborhood of so many ranch-houses. A rustic porch equipped with several comfortable-looking rocking-chairs ran across the front, which faced the south. The windows, open to the morning breeze, were curtained, and presently through one of them Drummond spied a moving figure that brought a sparkle to his eyes. Without hesitation he walked swiftly across the open space and, resting his arms on the window-sill, addressed the sole occupant of the room, who stood with her back toward him.

"Howdy, Mis' Foulkes," he said cheerfully. "I hope I see yuh well."

The woman turned swiftly, revealing a square, tanned, fairly wrinkled, and rather rugged countenance dominated by an exceedingly determined chin and a pair of snapping black eyes.

"My land o' love!" she ejaculated, moving swiftly toward the window. "Dirk Drummond! Where in all creation d' you come from?"

"Jest slid down yore back fence, ma'am," he

told her drawlingly. "I left Bar B Monday some while before sun-up an' been on the way here ever since."

"My fathers! What yuh been doin'? pickin' posies by the way, or jest enjoyin' the mountain air?"

Dirk grinned engagingly. "Neither one nor tother, ma'am. I was tryin' to shake a bunch o' cow-men who were out after my scalp, an' I like to rid over every square mile o' Bald Mountains. I might 's well tell yuh first as last, Mis' Foulkes, 'cause yo're shore to worry it outa me in the end; but I stole a hoss off'n Jed Hanby, an' it seems like the whole country has got stirred up over it."

Mrs. Foulkes gave him a sharp rap on one shoulder. "Ain't yuh never serious, Dirk Drummond?" she admonished. "Quit that foolin' an' tell me straight out what 's happened."

Dirk's lips continued to smile, but some of the sparkle faded from his dark eyes. "I am tellin' yuh, ma'am," he returned quietly. "Mebbe yuh recollect that sorrel I rid over last time I was here, him with the——"

"O' course I do," interrupted Mrs. Foulkes curtly. "Ain't that my business? Crinkly light mane an' tail, he had; a right smart hoss with

blood in him, an' gentle as a kitten. What about him?"

"He was in my string ever since I come to the outfit a year ago last April. Wild an' high-strung he was at first, but I liked the ol' fellah an' treated him right an' we got to be reg'lar pals. Believe me, I took a lot o' trouble breakin' in that li'le hoss an' never used a quirt on him once. He was that willin' yuh did n't have to. Well, a week to-morrow Hanby roped him outa the corral when I was off with the bunch, an' rid him in to town. I never got the rights of it, but I reckon he was rough with Jerry an' the li'le hoss must 'a' got ribbed up or somethin' an' throwed him."

"Served him good an' proper," interjected Mrs. Foulkes with relish. "Jed Hanby allus was a brute with hosses."

"You said it!" agreed Drummond harshly, his lips straightening grimly. "I was n't around when he come back, but Sim Landers told me all about it. Seems Hanby come in fair frothin' at the mouth. He tied Jerry to the corral fence an' went an' got one o' them Spanish bits outa the harness-room, the kind that 'll jest about tear a critter's tongue outa his mouth. He put that on an' rid him around for half an hour or more lashin' him till he was plumb weary with a wire-

wound quirt. When I come in an' seen that hoss——"

Drummond broke off and turned his head suddenly to one side. His big, long-lashed eyes were wide and hard, and there was a dead-white streak around his mouth.

"There ain't much use my tellin' yuh how he looked, ma'am," he went on quietly. "He was clean petered out, an' when he seen me he limped over an' dropped his head down on my shoulder, an'—— Well, if Hanby 'd been around then I shore would have plugged him full o' lead. The only thing that stopped me later was thinkin' I would n't be helpin' the li'le hoss none by that. To make a long story short, when I got a holt on myself I went an' asked Jed to sell me the sorrel. I had about thirty dollars saved up an' near a month's pay comin', an' I figgered he 'd jump at the chance o' gettin' about double what the hoss was worth in open market. Would he? Not him! Said he would n't sell that hoss for a thousand dollars. Told me he was aimin' to wait till the critter healed up a bit an' then do it all over again, an' keep that up till he got square with the hoss for throwin' him."

He ended in a harsh, grating note of ill-suppressed fury, one hand gripping the window-ledge

with a fierce, unconscious force. Mrs. Foulkes stared at him, eyes snapping and a round spot of bright color in each wrinkled cheek.

"Ugh. The cowardly brute!" she ejaculated. "My country! The man oughta be tarred an' feathered. So that 's it, eh? Then yuh jest went an' took the hoss?"

"Shore. There was n't nothin' else to do. At that, Jed oughta be thankful, 'cause if he 'd tried that game again on Jerry while I was around I 'd 'a' killed him; that 's all. I run the hoss off late Sunday night, leavin' a note for Hanby sayin' he could have what he owed me for pay."

"That would n't go in law, o' course," remarked Mrs. Foulkes reflectively. "An' if I know Jed Hanby, he pocketed the note an' said nothin' about it. I s'pose he was after yuh hotfoot next mornin'."

"I 'll say he was. He must 'a' got the whole push out on the run. I knew he would, an' I knew Pinch Gritling would keep him stirred up if he felt anyways inclined to let things drop. He 's a mean cuss, Grit is, an' hates me like a dose of poison, especially since I beat him at the Ogden rodeo last fall. So I played safe an' kept off'n the main trails, stickin' mostly to the backwoods: I was headin' south an' would have made a clean

get-away, I reckon, only for one of them bum deals yuh get sometimes unexpected-like."

He went on to tell briefly of his encounter with Anne Sherwood, of being traced and trapped in an unfamiliar *cul-de-sac* in the hills, and of the stirring coil of circumstance that followed.

Jennie Foulkes listened to the tale with keen interest, interrupting now and then with a forceful exclamation or a brusque question. She knew George Sherwood, but because of the remoteness of the Hidden Valley ranch and the fact that she got her supplies from Lewistown on the western slope of Bald Mountains instead of Painted Post, she had not yet heard of the presence of a girl at the Double Circle.

"Land sakes alive!" she exclaimed, on hearing of Anne's exploit. "Think o' George Sherwood havin' a niece like that! Where 'd she get her pep, I wonder. Must be from her ma. I hope for her sake they don't find out she let yuh loose. Hanby 's plumb likely to make George pay through the nose, an' she 'd get it second-hand."

"What d' yuh mean?" asked Dirk in a puzzled tone.

"Mean? Why, ain't yuh heard? Jed 's had that fellah under his thumb this long time back. Loaned him money an' all that. I did hear he 'd

even took title to the ranch. It 's certain shore, anyhow, that George jumps when Hanby pulls the strings. He allus was a poor sort of a male critter, that lazy an' shiftless he 'd set an' let grasshoppers eat holes in his breeches. Well, what happened next?"

Drummond briefly concluded his story, ending in an apologetic note.

"I did n't 'low to mix yuh up in this at all, ma'am," he said regretfully "But there I was with the bunch so close behind there was n't any chance o' losin' 'em by headin' south through a country they knew a whole lot better 'n I did. So I thought I 'd jest slip over here an'——"

"That's enough o' that kind o' talk," interrupted Mrs. Foulkes decidedly. "Folks may set me down for a flinty old cross-grained party, but I got some heart. I ain't forgot how yuh handled that drunken maniac last year an' saved me from bein' shot up or somethin'. Turn about is fair play. You 'll stay here as long as yuh feel inclined, an' if Jed Hanby comes around lookin' for yuh, he 'll—— Land sakes alive! Here my tongue 's runnin' along like a bell-clapper, an' yuh jest about starved to death. Where 'd yuh leave that sorrel?"

"Over behind the trees."

"Go get him. He 'll want a good feed same as yuh. Don't yuh fret about the boys. They 're safe. There ain't one of 'em would let a peep outa him. Jed Hanby nor that sneak Gritling ain't pop'lar around Hidden Valley, believe me! Pete Darrell's somewheres around. Yuh jest hand over yore hoss to him an' come right back here. By that time I 'll have somethin' cooked up for yuh."

CHAPTER VIII

JENNIE FOULKES REMEMBERS

DRUMMOND refused a fourth cup of coffee and leaned back in his chair with a sigh of repletion.

"I 'd bust if I took anythin' more, ma'am," he said. "That shore went right to the spot."

Mrs. Foulkes, who had watched him consume his food with great satisfaction, gave a sniff.

"For a man that ain't had but two meals in three days, yo're powerful delicate with yore victuals," she commented "I know them two nesters back in the mountains, an' I 'll bet a cookie what yuh got off'n them would n't give yuh indigestion."

"It was n't bad a-tall," protested Drummond. "An' they each of 'em gave me a snack to take away."

"Grease Hopkins must of got religion or somethin', then," she told him with a shrug. "Or else yuh paid him about three times what the grub was worth."

"Well, o' course I offered——"

"An' he took it, I 'll allow," cut in Mrs. Foulkes triumphantly. "I knowed it was somethin' like that." Suddenly her square, firm-fleshed, healthily tanned face crinkled and she gave a deep-throated chuckle. "All mornin' I 've been havin' a quiet laugh to myself," she commented. "It shore hits me funny that Jed Hanby of all people should be roustin' around after yuh for horse-stealin'."

Drummond gave her a puzzled look. "Why Hanby 'of all people'?" he inquired. "O' course we know he 's a skunk an' a coyote an' a few other things I would n't hardly mention before a lady. But yuh gotta admit, strictly speakin', he 'd got the rights with him. Yuh can't force a man to sell his property if he don't want to."

"Oh, shore! I know all that. He 's on the right side of the law for once. But it was n't always that way, not by no means. There was a time a consid'able while back when he was mixed up with cattle-rustlin' on a scale that would make yore little stunt look like a kernal o' corn alongside a full bushel."

Dirk paused in fashioning a cigarette and stared at her in wide-eyed astonishment.

"Why—why, what in all creation d' yuh mean, ma'am?"

Mrs. Foulkes chuckled again with relish. "Don't wonder yo're surprised," she said. "Most folks would be, considerin' the reputation he 's worked up for himself around these parts. It was long before yore time, o' course—twenty years an' more ago—when I was livin' with my husband over in Kaysville about a hundred miles across the border. We had n't took up ranchin' then but kept the store an' did well, there bein' six or seven good-sized outfits in the neighborhood that stocked up with us. One of 'em, the Cross Box, lay well to westward, buttin' up against the foot-hills. It was run by a man named Twitchell, who 'd stocked it with cattle bought in the neighborhood. The brands was vented, o' course, an' when cows began to be run off here an' there, an' calves was lost mysterious-like, nobody could say as how the Cross Box stock was n't the same lot he 'd bought in the beginnin'. He was that slick he did n't even begin to rouse suspicions for pretty near two years, an' it was close on another year before the bunch roused up an' went after him. Like I said at the time, it served the slow-pokes right to find him gone. Some little bird had peeped, an' he took wings an' flew. He 'd sold the stock, or drove it off back through the mountains, sold the ranch through an agent in

Sweetwater, an' when the gang raided the outfit there wa'n't a dollar's wuth they could recover on. Mad as wet hens, they were, believe me."

She paused, and Dirk eyed her in a puzzled fashion.

"But what 's all that got to do with Jed Hanby?" he inquired.

Mrs. Foulkes laughed. "My land! I allus did tell a story backward. Why, he was Twitchell's side-pardner, or so they said. Called himself Hanley then an' had a little joint jest outside of town. He allus spent a lot o' time at the Cross Box, an' when the big muss came he dropped outa sight. Folks allowed that he was mixed up in the crooked work all right, an' when I first sot eyes on him over here, believe me, he was n't none too pleased to see me."

"Did yuh say anythin' to him?" asked Dirk eagerly.

"Not me. What was the good? It was all over an' done with twelve years before, an' I did n't see anythin' to be gained by rakin' it up again. Besides, I had n't any real proof he was mixed up with Twitchell, though there was n't any doubt of it in my mind. When he skipped from Kaysville he did n't have a dollar hardly to bless him-

self with, an' yet inside o' two years he buys the Bar Two outfit, lock, stock, and barrel. Changin' his name an' all, too, looked more 'n suspicious to me."

"But yuh don't really *know*," said Dirk in a disappointed tone. "And I s'pose there ain't anybody else that does, either, it happenin' so long ago."

"I would n't go so far as to say that," returned Mrs. Foulkes. "It comes to me now that Gus Sheckler, who was sheriff then, was a whole lot wiser about the whole business than he made out. Him an' Twitchell was thick enough, an' when the showdown come he had to be prodded considerable to get after the fellah. Folks went so far as to say he got his pickin's, an' when he come up for office again he was thrown down mighty hard. It 's likely he 'd know about Hanby, an' so would Bill Roach who was foreman on the Cross Box. What 's yore idear? Thinkin' o' gettin' a strangle holt on Hanby?"

Drummond nodded, his lips twisted in a wry grin. "Shore. If I could hold somethin' like that over his head he 'd likely drop the proceedin' like a hot cake, an' probably sell the sorrel to boot. I s'pose it all happened too long ago to threaten

him with the law, but even at that he 'd hate like poison to have it come out."

"He would that," chuckled Mrs. Foulkes. "But my soul! You could n't loosen up Gus Sheckler's tongue. He 's settled down on a ranch about twenty miles north o' Kaysville, an' I understand from my husband's brother, who writes about once a year, that he 's jest beginnin' to live down the old business an' get folks to take up with him again. He 'd have nothin' to gain an' everything to lose by rakin' it up again now."

Drummond's hand dropped absently to the butt of his borrowed six-shooter. "Still, I might—persuade him," he returned with a shrug.

"You might get yoreself in a whole lot of new trouble, too," remarked Mrs. Foulkes, who had observed the movement. "O' course it 's none o' my affair, but I 'd say it was a mighty fool business takin' chances like that when by layin' snug here for a few weeks till the thing blows over yuh can slip off south without anybody bein' the wiser."

"But I ain't so shore I want to go south," protested Dirk.

"Oh! You ain't?"

"No. Why should I be? I like the country

here, an' I got friends an' all around these parts." A faint flush darkened his tan, and then he grinned at Mrs. Foulkes. "Why, ma'am, if I skipped out like yuh say I would n't be able to see yuh no more."

"Ha! So yuh would n't. Nor any other of yore friends old—or *new*." There was a shrewd twinkle in Mrs. Foulkes's eyes, and for a moment she seemed inclined to pursue the subject further. Then she apparently dismissed it with a shrug of her broad, mannish shoulders. "Don't think I ain't interested," she said. "I 'd give the world to see Jed Hanby take a dose of his own medicine. But knowin' Gus Sheckler it don't strike me as practical. If it was Roach, now, you 'd stand a heap better chance——"

She broke off abruptly and moved hastily to the nearest window. In the sudden silence Dirk caught the faint thud of horses' hoofs and the jingle of a bit, and in an instant he was on his feet, every muscle tense.

"Who——" he breathed.

"Gritling an' a bunch o' Bar Two men," snapped Mrs. Foulkes, wheeling swiftly away from the window. Her black eyes flashed around the room and came to rest on a table standing against the wall, its long, brilliantly red cloth al-

most trailing on the floor. "Get under there!" she ordered harshly, with a sweeping gesture of one arm. "Quick!"

Hand on his gun, Drummond hesitated an instant. Then he dived for the hiding-place, and as the red cloth fell behind him he was aware of Mrs. Foulkes sweeping the crockery from the table into a pan and covering it with a dish-cloth. An instant later her voice, low-pitched and cautious, came to him:

"Where 's the sorrel?"

"Darrell put him in one o' the box-stalls," he whispered. "He thought it 'd be safer than the corral."

She made no answer, but Drummond heard her heavy tread crossing the kitchen toward the open door. He heard, too, the jingle of spurs and the murmur of men's voices coming nearer, and, crouching against the wall, he slid his six-shooter out of the holster and drew it cautiously around in front of him.

CHAPTER IX

A SCORE IS PAID

ABOUT ten minutes later Drummond relaxed into an easier position, an amused grin twitching at the corners of his mouth. The efficient manner in which the lady had met and utterly vanquished the intruders not only appealed to his sense of humor but roused within him a feeling of grateful admiration.

From the slight elevation of the door-step she had given instant verbal battle and, with a steady, unfaltering stream of vitriolic comment which did not hesitate at unpleasant personalities, she beat down arguments, swept aside contentions, smothered opposition, and ended by a triumphant rout of the cowed, submissive party of mere men. She was evidently following up her victory, too, for through the open door snatches of her shrill, incessant clamor rose high and clear above the sounds of horses hastily mounted and as hastily ridden away.

"They did n't have no chance a-tall," muttered

Dirk, stretching his long legs. "Sufferin' Peter! Talk about women bein' the weaker sex! If a man had the nerve to get off about a quarter o' that stuff he 'd be as full o' holes as a colander by now."

Presently he crawled out from under the table and, stepping to the window, observed with satisfaction the Bar Two crowd in full flight down the valley. To him entered Mrs. Foulkes, flushed and heated, but radiating satisfaction.

"Well, I gave that ornery bunch a piece of my mind," she announced complacently.

Dirk grinned. "Gosh! Was that only a piece? I 'd shore hate to have the hull of it throwed into me."

"You need n't laugh. It 's a serious matter. They 're gone, but it 's my opinion they ain't gone far. They smell a rat."

"Huh! You mean they 're goin' to hang around an' make another try to get me?"

"I shore do. There ain't but two ways outa Hidden Valley, as yuh know: the one yuh come by an' the reg'lar trail at the south end. That bunch can cover 'em both easy while Hanby beats it for the sheriff an' a warrant. He 'll hate to do it, jest like he 'll hate to cross me, but he 's a stubborn varmint, Jed is, an' he ll do it if he sees

there ain't no other way. I can run a crowd like that off my ranch, but if Billings shows up with a proper warrant it 'll be different."

Drummond nodded. "Shore. Yuh couldn't well buck him. Looks like it was up to me to pull my freight pronto, before any of 'em have time to ride around an' cover the way up the cliffs back there."

"They 've covered it a'ready," Mrs. Foulkes informed him curtly. "I took a look up there jest now an' glimpsed a couple of men an' some hosses. It would n't surprise me none if Jed Hanby had took that part o' the job, not bein' over-anxious to meet me face to face."

She paused, her face thoughtful. "There 's two ways out of it that I see," she went on presently. "You can wait till dark an' take a chance o' slippin' past 'em down at the south end by walkin' yore hoss in the creek. There 's a string o' willows that 'll hide yuh most o' the way, an' the ripples 'll deaden any noise yore cayuse makes. The other way is to hide yuh right here."

"How the dickens could yuh do that if they make a regular search? It 's all open country. The hoss——"

"I 'll tell yuh," she interrupted. "Over on the west side about a mile north o' here there 's a

little blind gulch part way up the mountain that nobody could find in a month o' Sundays. Jest by chance I stumbled on it three years ago, an' there ain't a soul knows of it except Lush Barton, my foreman. It 's kinda cramped, an' there 's be some job gettin' the hoss up, but it can be done, an' yuh an' the sorrel would be safe there even with a whole raft o' deputies scourin' the valley."

Drummond's eyes narrowed thoughtfully, and he ran the edge of one boot absently back and forth along a crack in the immaculately scrubbed floor.

"Seems like I 'd rather take a chance on beatin' it to-night," he said at length. "Lord knows how long I 'd be holed up there, an' all the time I might be gettin' after this here Sheckler. Would there be any way, though, of keepin' the hoss in this gulch?"

"The sorrel? Why, I reckon so. But——"

"If I make a break to-night I 'd rather not take him with me—providin' yuh 'd give me the loan o' one o' yore stock," Dirk explained. "Takin' a chance with m'self is all right, but if Hanby ever got his hands on the li'le hoss—— Well, ma'am, I 'd rather put a bullet through his head right now than have that happen."

"That 's true," nodded Mrs. Foulkes. "It

would n't do. There ain't any reason I can see why he should n't be kep' up there. There 's a trickle o' water comin' down the cliffs, an' Lush could take him feed at night. O' course I 'll lend yuh a cayuse. Still an' all, I can't get rid of' the notion that yuh 'll have yore trouble for yore pains with Sheckler. If it was only Roach, now. Twitchell gave him a dirty deal, I understand—double-crossed him or suthin'—an' he got sore on the whole outfit. It 's my opinion he 'd spill out everything he knew about Hanby an' be glad o' the chance."

"That 's all right, but how yuh goin' to get hold of the man after all these years? Yuh don't happen to know where he is now, I reckon?"

"No, I don't—exactly," she admitted regretfully. "Like all the hands, he beat it an' dropped outa sight for a good bit. But about two years ago my brother-in-law ran across him in Butte an' had some talk with him. That 's how I knew he was sore. He was workin' in the mines, but he told Tom he was pullin' up stakes soon an' goin' prospectin', so Lord knows where he is now."

Mrs. Foulkes turned to her dishes with a snort as if indignant at Roach's lack of consideration in not keeping her posted as to his various movements. Evidently she had abandoned all hope

of turning Drummond from his purpose, for while she washed crockery and tinware with swift dexterity she fell to discussing the details of his approaching departure.

At her suggestion Dirk remained in the ranch-house throughout the afternoon to escape being observed by the men stationed on the cliff while Mrs. Foulkes herself carried out the various preparations she deemed necessary. It was not until dusk had veiled the lower levels of the valley that he sought the stable for a final look at Jerry before the horse was led away to his hiding-place by Lush Barton.

Three hours later he stood beside a mettlesome roan exchanging a few brief words of farewell with his hostess.

"Now mind yuh don't go doin' some fool stunt that won't get yuh nothin' but trouble," she told him emphatically. "See Tom first thing an' find out how the land lays. I would n't put no trust in Sheckler if I was yuh; he allus was a mean cuss. An' remember yo're to come straight back here whether yuh get what yo're goin' for or not. It 'll take yuh a week, an' by that time I 'll be shed o' these smart critters spyin' around."

"I 'll do all o' that, ma'am," smiled Drummond. "An' I shore am obliged to yuh."

"You need n't be," she interrupted. "I ain't done nothin' yet to speak of. Well, time yuh cut stick. Pete 'll ride along with yuh to where yuh strike the creek. Good-by."

Drummond responded and, swinging into the saddle, joined Darrell, who waited for him at a little distance. Together they headed southward, riding at an easy pace and chatting companionably on a variety of subjects, among them the character and disposition of the owner of Hidden Valley outfit.

Darrell joked a little about her eccentricities, but Dirk observed as he had before a strong undercurrent of respect and liking beneath the banter. The Hidden Valley men might—and did—grumble superficially at Mrs. Foulkes's bossy ways and managing methods but at bottom they were all loyal to the core. And in Drummond's two years' acquaintance with the outfit not one of them had left, which tells the story better than any amount of wordy explanation. More than once before Dirk had wished one of them would take his time and give him a chance for the place. Now, as they rode along the peaceful, shut-in valley—given over almost entirely to the breeding of horses—he found himself wishing that again, rather fervently.

They followed the course of the stream, which presently swerved close to the western cliffs. About eight miles from the ranch-house the valley took an abrupt turn, and as they rode past a high, jutting mass of rock, Dirk caught sight of a wavering yellow glow ahead.

"There they are, Pete," he commented.

"Shore," nodded Darrell. "Jest where I expected they 'd camp, where the valley narrows down. By walkin' the cayuses easy we can make another half-mile, I reckon, before yuh take to the water."

There was little more conversation, and that only in guarded undertones. The glow from the camp-fire grew brighter and more distinct, and at length Darrell halted in the shelter of a clump of willows.

"Here's as good a place as any," he whispered. "The bank 's slopin'. Well, s'long, old man. Take it easy, an' yuh can sneak past the suckers all right. See yuh soon."

Dirk waved his hand and without delay guided the roan down the sloping bank. The animal snorted a little and held back, but by dint of soothing words Drummond quieted his fears and persuaded him to take the stream.

The bottom was firm and the water at no place

more than two feet deep. The willows formed a reassuring screen and, though progress was necessarily slow, Dirk's spirits rose at the ease with which the adventure seemed to be panning out. He had reached a point almost opposite the fire and could hear the murmur of voices and catch glimpses of figures through the trailing branches, when of a sudden the sight of a glowing spark not more than forty feet ahead made him halt the horse instantly.

At once he realized that it was a lighted cigarette and that the smoker must be standing on the bank close to which he had been riding. For a moment or two he sat motionless. Then, fearing that the fellow would see him perched upon the horse, he lifted one leg cautiously over the saddle-horn and slid noiselessly into the water.

Neither he nor Darrell had counted on their placing a guard here, and it complicated the situation tremendously. Drummond had little doubt of being able to spur past the fellow and get away. But in that case the alarm would be raised instantly, and he would have the whole gang after him as swiftly as they could reach their mounts.

As he sat there thinking, the talk and laughter of the Bar Two men coming to him through the fringe of trees, Dirk suddenly recognized above

the other voices the harsh, disagreeable tones of Pinch Gritling. For an instant he thought it was because the man had raised his voice. Then all at once he realized, with a tense straightening of the lips, that the fellow was coming nearer.

The moment of indecision that followed seemed to drag interminably. Already Dirk could make out the man's approaching figure through the trailing willow branches. Gritling was headed for the creek and would reach the bank within a foot or two of where Drummond stood. A swift glance down-stream showed the fugitive the look-out's cigarette still glowing brightly.

What followed came with that lightening rapidity which outstrips the sluggish words of narrative. Gritling's outstretched hands were parting the willow branches at the very instant that a whirling spark, a faint hiss, and the sound of retreating footsteps told Drummond that the second man was abandoning his post.

His first impulse was to fly. Then swiftly he realized that it was too late—and was not sorry. A sudden, fierce exultation surging over him, Dirk dropped the reins and gained the bank in two agile strides. A gleam from the camp-fire, sifting through the leaves, silhouetted for an instant Gritling's figure clearly. A second later Drummond's

fist, with all his youth and strength and bitter hate behind it, struck the foreman's chin with a terrific force that sent the man reeling backward, instantly unconscious.

"What 's the matter, Grit?" called a voice from the direction of the fire. "Knock into somethin'?"

Drummond had caught the falling body and was easing it noiselessly to the ground.

"Stubbed my toe, curse it!" he growled, with realistic harshness.

There was a laugh, and Dirk, swinging cautiously into the saddle, smiled grimly. A joyous thrill glowed through him as he pushed the horse as rapidly as he dared along the creek-bed. He wished he might be somewhere around when Grit came to, and hoped there had been light enough for the foreman to recognize the author of the blow. It would add greatly to his humiliation.

A hundred yards or more beyond the camp-fire Drummond reined the roan in toward the left-hand bank and, pushing through the willows, gained the trail. Here he roweled the animal gently with one spur and sped along through the night, his head half turned to listen.

It must have been nearly five minutes before that distant, muffled shout told him that the as-

sault had been discovered. Dirk laughed aloud boyishly.

"They 'll be a while tryin' to make out what hit him," he chuckled, "an' another while gettin' started. Their cayuses 'll be plumb weary from bein' rode all day, an' Sherwood's black ain't in the bunch." He slapped the roan's smooth neck. "They got about as much chance o' catchin' us as a snow-ball on the Fourth o' July, eh, beauty? Why, I 'll bank you to walk away from 'em like they was standin' still."

CHAPTER X

KAYSVILLE

TOWARD the end of the afternoon three days later Dirk Drummond entered the thriving town of Kaysville and rode leisurely along the main street. He had passed through the place some years ago, but in the interval it had grown considerably, pushing out several side streets, adding a number of new saloons and a second dance-hall, and wore a general air of busy prosperity which Dirk did not wonder at, considering the quantity of people abroad and the even larger number of horses tied to various hitching-racks.

He had no personal remembrance of Tom Foulkes' store, but Mrs. Foulkes's directions had been explicit, and so there was no necessity of asking questions that would at once stamp him as a stranger. Sitting loosely in the saddle, his fingers engaged in the deft fashioning of a cigarette, Drummond's lazy glance swept along the irregular, pretentious fronts of various buildings

to rest at length on the staring sign hanging above the door of the Happy Heart saloon.

"Two doors beyond an' next to the Bon Ton eatin'-house," he muttered under his breath.

A moment or so later the familiar name, done in straggling letters on a weather-beaten board, confronted him. Turning the roan, he slid out of the saddle, leisurely tied the reins to the hitching-rack, and strolled across to the entrance of the store.

A number of customers were being waited on by a short, stocky, grizzled man and his rather lank assistant. The former answered Jennie Foulkes's description accurately enough, but Dirk, unwilling to draw the general attention toward himself, made no effort to approach him directly. Leaning against the counter and smoking placidly, he waited until the men ahead of him had been attended to and the gray-haired man approached him with an inquiring stare.

"Coupla boxes o' forty-fives," Dirk drawled, as the proprietor paused on the other side of the counter.

When these were placed before him, he met the older man's glance and grinned.

"Yo're Tom Foulkes, I reckon," he remarked, in a tone which, though it did not seem purposely lowered, was inaudible to the pair of cow-punchers

arguing with the assistant over the price of shirts a little further down the store.

"I shore am," returned Foulkes, with a puzzled quirk of his shaggy eyebrows. "Yuh got me, though. I ain't gen'ally backward about rememberin' faces, but——"

"You ain't now," Drummond reassured him. "I would n't know yuh from Adam only for yore sister tellin' me what yuh looked like."

The other's face brightened. "Jennie, eh? Yo're a friend o' hers? Well! How's she gettin' on? I ain't heard a word from her in six months an' more."

From under his broad hat-brim Drummond shot a swift glance of veiled significance across the counter. "She 's doin' fine," he answered, dropping his cigarette-end and grinding it with his heel. "Said if I come through Kaysville I was shore to look yuh up an' find out all about everythin'. My name 's Glover—Jim Glover. Reckon I 'll be beddin' down here to-night. Can't we get together an' eat supper at the hotel or somewheres?"

Foulkes seemed to take the cue instantly. "Shore we can," he returned readily, "only it won't be at the hotel. The wife would snatch me bald-headed if I let a friend o' Jennie's go over

to Sam Conner's place to eat." His glance sought the clock. "She 'll be dishin' up supper in half an hour or so. While yo're lookin' after yore cayuse, I 'll send word around to have her lay another plate. The corral 's around back, an' our house backs up on it from the other street."

Drummond made merely a light show of protest. The arrangement would give them a much better chance for a private talk than the hotel, at the same time making it unnecessary for him to be exposed to the gaze of Kaysville's population and chance visitors. Dirk's experience with the world had taught him that it is the unexpected which, despite probability and the law of averages, so often puts a crimp in a man's plans. So far he had seen no familiar face, but that did not prove that at any moment he might not run into some one who not only knew him but was aware of the recent happenings in the neighborhood of Painted Post.

He reached the door just as two men were entering and stood aside for a moment to let them pass. The new-comers were both cow-men, the first tall, blond, and not in his first youth. He had a pair of rather hard blue eyes which Dirk did not altogether fancy, though he returned the stranger's casual glance steadily enough.

"Not a fellah I 'd trust with my best girl or my coin, neither, Socks," he muttered to the roan as he swung into the saddle. "Them glassy lamps o' his don't look at yuh square a-tall."

A narrow alley between the two buildings led to an open space back of the buildings where there was a small corral and a rough frame building, half stable, half storehouse. Dirk unsaddled the roan and brought him feed and water, and then carried the saddle into the barn. He took his time, and when he finally strolled toward the rear entrance of the store Tom Foulkes was just coming out to join him.

Mrs. Foulkes was busy in the kitchen of their house, which fronted on a side street, but whose back door was not more than a score of yards away. She proved to be a small, angular woman of immense physical activity whose tongue clacked so nearly ceaselessly that Dirk wondered how its owner escaped strangulation. She was n't particularly inquisitive or prying and not at all malicious. She merely talked, with occasional panting, punctuating gasps for breath which swiftly roused in Drummond's breast a keen sympathy for his host. For a time he amused himself with imagining Jennie Foulkes's comments on this extraordinary volubility, but

this pastime presently palled and he was glad enough when Tom and he were able to retire to the front room and settle down to cigarettes and comparative calm. For a while the two sat silent smoking in grateful silence until at length Dirk, realizing that the respite was likely to be limited, plunged directly into an explanation of his real identity and the purpose of his visit to Kaysville.

Foulkes listened without comment. When the tale was finished he gave a grunt and swung one knee over the arm of his chair.

"So that 's how it stands," he commented. "Trust a woman to nose out things. I 've heard tell o' this Jed Hanby, but never met up with him. 'T ain't likely he 'd show his face around here."

"Hardly, considerin' everythin'. How about Sheckler? Jennie right about his bein' mixed up with the rustlin'?"

Foulkes rolled a slow cigarette. "I would n't wonder a mite," he returned, intent on his occupation. "Plenty o' folks think so, though there was n't what yuh 'd call real proof. He was too slick for that, though him an' Twitchell shore were thick enough. What 's yore idea? Gonna try an' get Gus to squeal on Hanby?"

"That 's what I had in mind."

Foulkes flicked the head of a match expertly with his thumb-nail and applied the flame to his cigarette.

"You 'll have some job on yore hands unless him an' Hanby have split," he commented, exhaling a lungful of smoke. "You ain't got anything that I see on Gus to make him loosen up. If it was Bill Roach, now—Jennie tell yuh how I met him in Butte a coupla years back? Shore. Wal, he was so damn sore at the way they treated him he 'd do anythin' to get square. Sheckler 's different. 'T ain't likely he 'd blat out somethin' to a perfect stranger that might get his own self in bad."

"Yuh don't think he an' Hanby are on the outs, then?" asked Dirk disappointedly. "Mrs. Foulkes had n't heard, but she said you 'd likely know."

"Wal, I don't. You see, I did n't come to Kaysville till two-three years after the Cross Box business was over an' done with. Like I told yuh, I never even seen this here Jed Hanby. All I know is that Gus Sheckler 's one mighty mean critter to get any information out of if he ain't minded to give it. If him an' Hanby are still friends yuh could n't get a word outa him with a six-gun. On the other hand, if they 've split—

an' that 's possible enough—he 'd likely tell yuh all he knows against the other fellah an' a lot besides by way of gettin' square."

"An' that 's that," drawled Drummond, as the older man paused. "Sort of a toss-up, huh? Well, havin' come all this way, I reckon I 'll take a chance an' fan it over there to-morrow mornin'. How far 's this outfit o' his?"

"About twenty miles out along the Temple trail," responded Foulkes. "I dunno 's it 'll do any harm. Only lemme tell yuh this: If Sheckler turns yuh down—look out for trouble!"

"Meanin' he 'd try an' run a whizzer on me?" questioned Drummond. "I 'll do that little thing, but I ain't so shore yo're right. From all I hear he 's about lived down his dirty past, an' it ain't likely he 'll be wantin' to stir it all up again. Likewise, yuh gotta remember he 's goin' to be taken by surprise without any chance to think it over or make plans. Even if he should decide to try for my scalp, I 'll be well along toward the border before he gets started."

Foulkes did not seem entirely convinced, but the approach of his better half, preceded by a flow of talk that must have started in the middle of the kitchen, abruptly diverted his thoughts into other channels. Dirk was not surprised at his sudden

solicitude for his guest's horse, and when the two went forth to inspect the animal it was some time before they returned to the subject of Sheckler.

When this was finally resumed, Foulkes appeared to take it for granted that Drummond meant to follow out his plans. He merely repeated his former caution, outlined the route Dirk would take in setting forth on the morrow, and then abruptly turned the conversation to the doings of his sister-in-law.

"*She 'll* want to know," he explained, in a semi-apologetic tone, glancing momentarily toward one of the lighted windows of the house.

Dirk's lips twitched, and he hastened to regale his companion with an account of all the recent happenings at Hidden Valley. Later, stretched comfortably on his bed in the small upper room of the Foulkes domicile, he listened drowsily for a space to the ceaseless rise and fall of that shrill voice which came to him, happily muffled, through the thin partition.

"Golly!" he muttered in an awed tone. "Don't she ever stop day or night? She 's shore got that poor galoot wore down to a whisper." He yawned sleepily. "I 'd like to start her off in front of Jennie, I would. Some bawlin' out she 'd get, I 'll tell a man!"

CHAPTER XI

THE AMBUSH

IT WAS nearly noon next day when Drummond, his face slightly flushed and set in hard, angry lines, whirled away from the Flying M ranch-house and took the track leading down into the Kaysville trail.

Despite Tom Foulkes's pessimistic comments, he had started out that morning with a fair amount of confidence in his ability to extract something of the desired information from Gus Sheckler. The day was fine and the ride unaccompanied by any untoward incident. He reached his destination as he had planned in the neighborhood of eleven and found that Sheckler was at home. But as Drummond recognized instantly in the person of the ex-sheriff that burly individual who had passed him yesterday at the entrance to Foulkes' store, he experienced his first real qualm. There was a glassy, impenetrable expression in those cold, blue eyes, a stubborn set to the tight lips and heavy chin which Dirk did

not find encouraging. And though he did his best, bringing into play every art and artifice at his command, in the end he failed completely.

At the very first mention of his errand, the ex-sheriff, who had greeted him with a good deal of surface heartiness, instantly froze. He flatly denied ever having had any connection or interest in Hen Twitchell's doings, stated emphatically that he had never even heard of Hanley's being mixed up in the affair, and scorned the suggestion that the present owner of the Bar Two outfit was the same man who had disappeared from Kaysville nearly twenty years before.

Persuasion failed utterly to move him, and veiled threats merely increased the stubborn set of his square, grizzled chin. Drummond was tempted once or twice to see what force might do. But throughout the interview, which took place on the veranda of Sheckler's comfortable ranch-house, several Flying M punchers were more or less constantly in evidence, making such a thing almost impossible. Moreover, Dirk had a feeling that he would gain nothing that way. Sheckler was not the type of man to knuckle under at the sight of a drawn gun, and Drummond strongly suspected that an attempt at force would merely increase his inborn Teuton stubbornness,

to say nothing of precipitating a dangerous situation from which it would have been difficult or impossible to escape.

Indeed, as he rode away angry and disappointed, Dirk was n't at all sure that such a situation had not already begun to develop. A furtive gleam in Sheckler's cold blue eyes, a twitch of the hard lips, a certain nervous alertness of manner, made Drummond feel that it would be wise to depart from the neighborhood without any loss of time.

If rumor was right and Sheckler had only just succeeded in living down the scandal that had lost him office so many years ago, he would naturally regard with something much stronger than mere disfavor the person who seemed inclined to dig up that malodorous past. He was not, one guessed, an individual of many scruples. And while he might be just a little slow in making up his mind and laying plans, Dirk had a notion that once he decided on a move he was the sort to stick to it with bulldog tenacity and to stop at nothing in carrying it to a successful finish.

"He 'd have everything his own way, too," reflected Drummond, beginning to realize how strongly circumstances were against him. "He could bump me off or get it done and then swear

I was an outlaw resistin' arrest. Likely he 'd get a bunch o' credit for it, too. Darned if that henpecked brother-in-law o' Jennie's ain't got more sense than I thought. It 's up to yuh to drift, son, an' lose no time about it, neither."

He had taken the trail leading to Kaysville, intending to stop for a moment and let Foulkes know how he had made out. But now of a sudden he changed his mind. As soon as he was out of sight of the ranch-buildings he urged the roan to a lope and kept a sharp lookout on either side for some spot at which he could leave this dangerous thoroughfare.

It was some time before such an opportunity presented itself. The country was fairly level and for the most part devoid of trees. On both sides of the trail bunches of grazing cattle bore evidence to the extent of the Flying M range and the likelihood, if one undertook to cross these open stretches, of encountering stray punchers belonging to the hostile outfit. Drummond had covered nearly twelve miles before he came to a shallow gulch leading off to the right which promised shelter. A searching backward glance showed an empty sweep of trail stretching behind him. Apparently no one was in sight, and without a

moment's delay he turned his horse and rode into the gulch.

He left it about three miles beyond and, heading southwest, pushed on rapidly. By the middle of the afternoon he had covered nearly forty miles without encountering a single soul and began to feel that he had eliminated the danger of successful pursuit.

Night before last he had put up at a frowzy hotel in Beaver Ford, a straggling settlement about twenty miles from the state-line. There was no other town between this and Kaysville, and, being by this time ravenously hungry, he was eager to reach the place before dark. To make assurance doubly sure he had decided not to sleep there, but he could at least get supper and have a lunch put up.

By the combination of good luck and an excellent bump of locality, Dirk came out on the well trodden trail just as dusk was falling, and half an hour later rode into Beaver Ford. Though the regular supper was over he persuaded the hotel-keeper, a bow-legged, foxy-faced man of forty-odd, to rustle him some grub and provide a feed for his horse. When he rode on again an hour later his lips were twitching a little, and

as he rolled a cigarette he musingly addressed the roan:

"I ain't dead in love with that bird, I ain't. He 's got a shifty eye, an' he wants to know too much. One o' these days he 'll go bulgin' into the affairs o' some party that ain't as easy-goin' an' mild-tempered as me, an' they 'll hang his hide on the fence. Still an' all, he did n't get much change outa us, did he, Socks, ol' hoss? If he believes all I told him he 'll go barkin' up a whole forest o' wrong trees. Well, let 's hunt a soft place to take a snooze on. Most any rock would be better than that flea-ridden cot I slept on the other night."

About six miles beyond Beaver Ford the trail passed through a growth of firs, into which Drummond turned his horse. He passed the night comfortably enough on a bed of dry needles and was off at daybreak. His goal was a small cabin nestling at the edge of the foothills about fifty miles from Hidden Valley, occupied by two old range friends who had tired of working for some one else and were slowly and painfully building up a good little ranch property of their own. Dirk had dropped in on them that first night and given them an outline of his recent experiences and present errand, and had promised to stop on his way

back to spend the night and let them know how he had made out.

He thought of them more than once as he rode through the sparsely settled country. There had been a time when he had regarded Tuttle and Jackson as fools to spend their days in incessant drudgery as they had been doing for nearly three years, but now his point of view seemed curiously to have changed. They were right, after all. A man was an ass to waste his time slaving for some one else when he might be making a home for himself. What was a little extra work when you might be making a start with an outfit of your own which would grow slowly but surely in size and value? Why be content with the crude discomforts of bunk-house or line-camp when you might have a snug little place, big enough at first for two but capable of—enlargement?

At this point Drummond's cogitations came to an abrupt finish and a slow flush darkened his tan.

"Cut it, yuh poor galoot!" he muttered, an involuntary grin twitching at the corners of his mouth. "Another five minutes an' yuh 'd been the father of a family. Come to earth. There ain't a girl alive would hitch up with a dog-gone outlaw who 's minus a job or any chance o' gettin'

one, an' down to his last twenty berries. Get a move on, Socks, ol' hoss. We 'll hit Bear Creek in half an hour an' fill up on some good chuck at that fat guy's joint."

To spare his horse Dirk had taken things easy all morning, and it was well past noon when he dismounted in front of a dingy frame structure set about midway in the straggling row of buildings that lined one side of Bear Creek's single street. He did not trouble to tie Socks, but merely let the reins trail, and, stamping across the sagging porch, he entered the hotel.

As he crossed the threshold a door in the rear of the big room closed noisily, and a man leaning against the old wooden bar dropped a sack of tobacco. Two other persons sat at one end of a long table covered with oil-cloth, and as Dirk approached the stout landlord he observed that all three were regarding him with curious half-furtive glances.

"Ain't too late for a feed, am I?" he inquired easily. "I 'll want one for m' hoss, too."

The far man hesitated, his pendulous throat working oddly. "I—I reckon we c'n—rustle yuh —somethin'," he mumbled. If you 'll—ah—set down, an' I 'll go see."

Drummond turned, glancing casually at the

man leaning against the bar. Instantly the fellow dropped his eyes to the cigarette he was fumbling between his fingers. He did not speak, nor did the other two. An ominous, unnatural stillness lay over the room. The atmosphere had suddenly become surcharged with tension and suspense.

Nerves tingling and every sense alert, Dirk hooked his right thumb in his chap-belt, his eyes raking the room with swift suspicion. Along one side were three windows, and as his glance swept over them he observed a faint, swiftly moving shadow pass the one nearest the rear corner. Instantly he wheeled and walked toward the door.

"I 'll put my hoss around in the corral an' come back," he drawled, glancing over one shoulder.

There was no answer. The landlord, his face the color of putty, was waddling hastily toward the rear door. The two men at the table had risen and were glancing about in scared uncertainty as if looking for some place of refuge.

Drummond gained the porch in a single leap and dodged away from the open doorway. His gun was out and leveled at the corner of the building, and as a figure slid around it his voice cut through the drowsy stillness of the peaceful, sun-

lit noontide with the sharp, menacing ring of steel.

"Hands up!"

The answer was a roar, a spurt of flame, the feel of a bullet fanning his cheek, as Drummond flung himself instinctively against the house wall.

His own gun barked, and the fellow at the corner of the building spun around and crumpled to the ground. An instant later two other men shot into view. One fell cursing with a bullet through his thigh. The other—Gus Sheckler—fired point-blank an instant before flame spurted for the third time from Drummond's weapon. Dirk was aware of a sharp pain across his ribs, but he scarcely observed it in the fierce satisfaction that welled up in him at the sight of the traitorous ex-sheriff toppling heavily backward.

"Come on, yuh bunch o' coyotes!" he snarled. "I 'm waitin' for yuh."

There was no immediate response, and in the momentary lull sane judgment got the better of Drummond's momentary fury. Already doors were banging, and the natives of Bear Creek were appearing on all sides. Unless he took refuge in the hotel, where he was likely to be holed up indefinitely to succumb finally to sheer numbers, now was his only chance to escape.

The roan, startled by the turmoil, had backed away a little from the hitching-rack and stood in the roadway, ears pricked and nostrils flaring. Drummond gaged the distance with his eye, darted swiftly across the uneven porch, and, with a flying leap, landed in the saddle. Snatching the reins, he fired a chance shot at the corner of the hotel, turned the horse straight for a gap between two buildings across the street, and spurred him sharply.

Socks jumped forward, clearing the open space in three strides. As the walls of the adjacent buildings engulfed him, Dirk's heart leaped exultingly and his eyes sparkled. From behind came a chorus of angry shouts punctuated by the sharp rattle of pistol-fire. Most of the bullets whined harmlessly overhead or buried themselves in the corner of the right-hand dwelling. But just as the fugitive had gained the rear of the building a sharp, searing pain stabbed through his left shoulder, making him reel a little with the shock and seeming instantly to paralyze his arm and fingers.

With a muttered oath he jabbed his gun into the holster and caught the reins in his right hand.

"Some of 'em must of come around the other

side of the hotel," he muttered as he urged the roan down a steep slope behind the house. "I was a nut not to think o' that."

At the foot of the slope he whirled to the right and headed for a rugged knoll a hundred yards or so distant, beyond which he could glimpse a wilderness of wooded hills. With each jump of the horse a red-hot agony burned in the wounded shoulder, bringing his teeth grating together and spraying his forehead with drops of sweat. From behind him came distant shouts and muffled clamor, and at last what he had dreaded—the steady beat of hoofs.

CHAPTER XII

TIGHTENING COILS

"WHATSA matter with him?" demanded George Sherwood querulously. "What yuh got against him, I 'd like to know? Lemme tell yuh, there ain't a girl in Fremont County but would jump at the chanct to marry Jed Hanby."

Anne leaned wearily against the rough trunk of the Douglas fir in front of the ranch-house.

"I don't happen to—like him; that 's all," she returned briefly.

"You don't like him, don't yuh?" Her uncle's voice was heavy with sarcasm. "Great Godfrey! What kinda man *do* yuh want? You ain't aimin' to die an old maid, I reckon."

The girl flushed a little at his tone. "I might do worse," she returned with a flash of her old spirit.

"Huh! Mebbe yuh think he ain't good enough for yuh."

"I have n't said that, have I?"

"No, but yuh act mighty like yuh thought so.

Here for two-three weeks now you 've been treatin' him like a dawg till it 's a wonder to me he don't throw yuh down cold. I 'll bet a dollar yuh got some highfalutin notions picked up back East that a man 's to be looked down on 'less he 's one o' these boiled-shirt white-collar dudes."

"How ridiculous!" protested Anne. "I 've told you before that I much prefer a man who—who gets out and does things—who is n't afraid of hardships and wins out against all sorts of difficulties and natural obstacles."

"Gawdamighty!" rasped Sherwood in an exasperated tone. "Well, ain't that jest what Hanby 's done? Ain't he built up the Bar Two from next to nothin' to the best payin' outfit in the county? He 's wuth forty thousand to-day if he 's wuth a cent."

Anne sighed wearily. It seemed as if she had gone over the same ground a hundred times.

"But I——"

Sherwood cut her short. "But yuh don't happen to fancy him, I s'pose," he snorted angrily. "Lemme tell yuh somethin'. If Jed Hanby has a mind he can ruin me as easy as snappin' his fingers."

Anne stared at him, bewildered. "I—I don't understand," she murmured.

"He 's got a mortgage on the Double Circle," Sherwood informed her curtly. He hesitated an instant, his glance shifting in some embarrassment. "Two-three hard years I hadda have money, an' he advanced it. If he forecloses, there ain't a chance in Gawd's world o' my findin' the cash."

The girl's eyes widened. "But, good Heavens! Surely he 'd never do such a thing because of——"

"I ain't none too certain o' that," cut in her uncle harshly. "Jed 's a man that ain't to be crossed. He 's set on this, an' when he was here yesterday he gimme a hint or two that took the tuck clean outa me. A nice thing if the girl I took in outa the kindness o' my heart should oust me from my property!"

Anne flinched as if he had struck her. "Oh!" she gasped, the color flaming into her face. "That is n't—fair of you. I—I 'll go away."

"Huh!" sneered Sherwood. "Go away, eh? Where to? Yuh ain't got two bits to bless yoreself with. How far 'd yuh go, an' what would yuh live on?"

The color faded from her face, leaving it drawn and tired. Resolutely she set her teeth in her lower lip to stop its quivering.

"I could—work," she told him briefly.

"What at? I 'd like to know. "You 'd make a fine cook in some ranch or other, I 'd say. Or mebbe yuh 'd like a job washin' dishes an' waitin' on table at Poole's hotel in Painted Post. Look-it!" His voice suddenly hardened, and he shook a threatening finger at her. "I had enough o' yore shilly-shallyin'. Jed 's comin' over in the mornin'. See yuh treat him right, understand? I ain't goin' to be throwed outa house an' home 'count o' yore whims an' fancies, believe me!"

Anne was suddenly overwhelmed by a feeling that she could not bear to listen to another word. Abruptly she turned and walked swiftly toward the house.

"You hear me?" Sherwood called after her.

"Yes, I heard," she answered without pausing or glancing back.

"Well, see yuh heed. Jed 'll be here by dinner-time to-morrow."

The girl made no answer. Entering the house with lagging step, she went directly to her room and, tossing her hat on the bed, dropped down in a chair beside the open window.

For nearly three weeks she had been troubled and increasingly unhappy—at times, indeed, oppressed by vague worries and nervous qualms.

But this last development fairly stunned her and gave her a horrible feeling of coils tightening inexorably around her. There was, withal, a curious sense of unreality in the affair. Until the day after Dirk Drummond's escape she had never once set eyes on Jed Hanby. It seemed incredible that in so brief a time he could have become this hideously dominating figure in her life, and yet it was only too miserably true.

After that first day he had come again—and again. She could not help but see that he was attracted and scorned herself for being capable of exciting the interest of such as he. On his third visit, to her astonishment and indignation, he made her a proposal, which she refused curtly and finally. She supposed the affair was ended then and there. When he came again a day or two later, showing in his manner no apparent consciousness of having been rebuffed, a carking little fear began to stir in the back of Anne's mind—a fear which, having about it something of the hypnotic terror of the helpless rabbit for the snake, grew a little with each succeeding sight of the man she so detested. And now had come this final blow to crush her with its paralyzing unexpectedness.

Anne thrust back her overshadowing hair and

resting her elbows on the window-sill, dropped her face into the upthrust palms. What was she to do? How was she going to escape from the coils that threatened her? She had no thought of obeying her uncle's behest; she would rather die. But, considering the situation, she began to realize how fatally right was his contention as to her helplessness. She had no other relatives. Her friends were far beyond her reach. Even if she could escape from the ranch, her scant supply of money was not enough to carry her beyond the reach of her uncle's authority or of Jed Hanby's influence.

It was that influence which principally frightened her. Hanby was unquestionably a power in the county. Anne had a feeling that if she should take refuge with any of the neighbors he had merely to say the word and they would give her up. It would be done cleverly and plausibly, of course; the man was far from lacking brains. But it would be done none the less. And so one more door of escape was closed to her permanently.

Anne raised her head and stared dully at the lengthening shadows of the trees beyond her window. On the bureau behind her the little traveling-clock ticked away the fleeting minutes, each

precious, vanished interval bringing her nearer that dread to-morrow.

What to do? What to do? What to do? The theme reiterated through her brain in unison with the ticking until she felt that a little more of it and she would go mad. She sprang up and paced the floor, racking her brain for some way of lightening that numb, dead helplessness which gripped her like a vise. Once her thoughts flashed incomprehensively to Dirk Drummond, and she had an odd, intuitive conviction that, even though a man and one she scarcely knew, he was the sort to whom one might confidently appeal at such a time.

"It would be a—strange thing to do," she reflected, a faint flush creeping into her pale, weary face. "But somehow I believe if he were here I 'd ask him to help me."

But this, of course, was quite out of the question. Since his flight that night Anne had heard nothing definite of his whereabouts. For the next few days the men had been stirring about the country a good deal—she guessed in search of him. But he had not been captured, the pursuit had long since been given up, and by this time he must be far away in safety.

Save for Mrs. Pritchard's unending chatter, supper that night was an uncommonly quiet meal. Once or twice Anne caught her uncle's searching, questioning glance and guessed what was in his mind. She was very thankful that he refrained from clothing his thoughts in words.

At breakfast he was noticeably irritable. Some work was afoot that needed his help. Anne did not gather precisely what it was; something to do with moving a small herd from one pasture to another, she thought. As he left the kitchen he motioned her outside.

"Jed may be here before I get back," he said curtly. "You ain't forgotten what I told yuh yesterday?"

Forgotten! A crooked, bitter smile twitched at the girl's lips as she remembered those interminable night hours. If only one could forget!

"No," she answered briefly.

"Well, see yuh treat him right an' no monkey-shines," he told her harshly, turning on his heel.

Anne watched him go, a gust of hot anger stirring within her. How could he be so cruel, so unfeeling? Suddenly she felt she hated him for his callous selfishness in seizing his own comfort and safety at the expense of her everlasting happiness.

Presently, avoiding Mrs. Pritchard, she entered the house by the front way and sought her room. Here, while her hands were occupied mechanically in tidying it up, her mind resumed that old, eternal fruitless round. Once it occurred to her that if she blazoned forth her share in Drummond's escape, which had never been discovered, she might temper Hanby's infatuation or destroy it utterly. But sober second thought decided her against the step. She was very doubtful of success, and if she failed she would merely have given them one more weapon to use against her.

One possibility only remained, a fervent appeal to her uncle's better nature. She had been too sore and angry yesterday to try it, and this morning there had been no time. If she could only convey to him how utterly she loathed the ranchman, loathed every line of his grizzled face—the hard, calculating eyes, the full lips set in that self-satisfied smirk; hating above everything the coarse, common, dominating confidence of his manner—surely he would soften.

Thinking it over, she grew a little hopeful. She even began to frame in her mind the phrases she would use, doing her best to make them brief and telling, so that he would not grow impatient and cut her roughly short.

Thus occupied, the time passed quickly—much too quickly, indeed, when she considered the imminent arrival of Jed Hanby. It was well along in the morning when a sudden shrill cry from Mrs. Pritchard penetrated to the living-room and brought Anne, startled, to the doorway.

For an instant she paused there listening. The cry had merged into a wail, mingled with which were broken, gasping words and the sound of a man's voice, shrill and excited. Anne's heart began to thud rapidly, and she ran down the hall toward the kitchen. Mrs. Pritchard met her at the door, barring the way with outflung arms.

"Go back, m' dear; go back!" she cried hysterically.

Anne stared at her, fear creeping into her big, long-lashed eyes and turning them into deep wells of purple. Her glance, sweeping past the woman's shoulder, rested on Wade Lambert, a young fellow who had been hired only the week before to help with the round-up. He leaned against the casing of the outer door, white and shaken. Beyond him she could glimpse McKenna and Apgar carrying between them—something—— One hand flew to her lips, and for an instant it seemed as if her heart ceased beating.

"What—is—it?" she demanded in a queer, strangled voice.

Mrs. Pritchard gulped and patted her arm mechanically.

"Poor lamb!" she muttered. "Yore uncle . . . One o' the steers got on the prod. . . . He—tried to rope him, but—but he missed. The brute knocked him clean out o' the saddle, an' he struck on his head——"

"O-h!" Anne turned white and thrust at the woman with both hands. "Let me go to him! I know—a little—— There must be something I can do——"

The woman eyed her pityingly. "There ain't," she told her with significant brevity. "He 's past all doin' for, God help him! You go back to yore room, there 's a lamb, an' let——"

Anne heard no more. Her face had turned the color of ashes, and there was an ominous whirring in her ears. Swaying, she caught the door-jamb and clung to it, digging her teeth resolutely into her bloodless lips. She must pull herself together. She must not faint; she would not!

She did not. Fighting resolutely, she managed to regain her self-control and assumed direction even over the dominating Mrs. Pritchard. Her

white face was like a tragic mask; her tearless eyes were full of mingled pain and horror, but she did not shrink or tremble. When it was all over and the body of George Sherwood had been laid decently on his bed with the shades drawn, she went into the living-room and closed the door behind her.

Mechanically she walked over to the front window and stood there staring out on the homely, placid, sunlit scene. Her heart lay like a dead thing within her; her mind was full of passionate regret and self-reproach. She had watched him go that morning in a state of bitter anger, that was almost hate. If one could only undo the past, could live over again just those few scant hours! If only——

A sense of movement down by the lower gate caught her attention and drew her brooding glance in that direction. Like a flash her slim figure straightened, and into her eyes, focused on that solitary rider loping toward the house, there came a look of terror.

Hanby! The stress and poignant sorrow of the past hour had swept all thoughts of the ranchman from her mind. Once, indeed, a momentary cold chill had come over her as she wondered, with her uncle gone, what on earth was going to

become of her. She had thrust the thought hastily from her as selfish and unworthy in the face of this infinitely greater tragedy.

Now it swept over her again, multipled a hundredfold. She could not check it; she did not even try. Stricken motionless, one hand resting on her wildly thudding heart, she could only stand there paralyzed, staring at the approaching horseman with eyes that were full of a great horror.

CHAPTER XIII

THE UNEXPECTED

HAGGARD, disheveled, dark rings under his sunken eyes, Dirk Drummond rode painfully across an open meadow beyond which the low roof-lines of a roughly built cabin showed indistinctly against a background of massed firs.

It was high noon, and the hot sun beating down on him added to the sense of wavering weakness and actual physical nausea which was making it more and more of an effort to stick to the saddle. To his dazed, tired brain the whole atmosphere seemed bathed in a vague, shimmering mist through which he had been riding for an eternity. The only actual penetrating reality was that sharp pain burning and throbbing in his shoulder from which there was no surcease or escape.

The night before, after he had lost the pursuing crowd of Sheckler's men in that mountain wilderness south of Bear Creek, he had bandaged it roughly, but not before he had bled profusely. A little later he had lost his own way, to stumble

on it again by accident barely an hour ago. And yet, despite those interminable miles behind him, the crossing of this little meadow seemed, somehow, the longest and most difficult stretch of all.

As the horse plodded on, the loose reins resting against his neck, Drummond swayed perilously from side to side. More than once it seemed as if nothing short of a miracle could keep him in the saddle for sixty seconds longer. But always he managed to drag himself upright, to sit erect for an instant, teeth gritted, eyes glazed, face streaming sweat, before he began slowly to topple again.

Came a moment when sunlight and shadow merged into a blank, wavering haze, when only sheer will-power and the mechanical grip of cramped fingers around the saddle-horn kept him from falling. Dully he realized that the end was at hand. He tried to halt the roan and failed. . . . Blackness began to creep over him, out of which he seemed to catch an alien sound as of voices infinitely distant. . . . Now he was slipping, slipping and somehow he did not care. . . . Weakly he braced himself for the shock of falling, and when it failed to come—when what might be hands caught him and held him up—his brain was too dead for more than the mildest feeling

of surprise. . . . A vague, blurred face leaped for an instant into his fading consciousness. Then it—and everything—was blotted out by merciful oblivion.

When he opened his eyes again Dirk found himself lying on one of the bunks in the cabin belonging to Stub Jackson and Sam Tuttle. He felt curiously limp and inert, and it was some time before he recognized the familiar room with its oddly characteristic combination of tidiness and masculine litter.

The sun pouring through an eastern window next attracted his attention. He wondered idly whether he had lain unconscious through the night or merely lapsed into the sleep of utter exhaustion. After all, it made very little difference. The pain in his shoulder had gone, and, save for an unwonted weakness and lassitude, he felt comfortable enough. Presently he dozed off, and when he wakened it was to find Tuttle standing beside the bunk looking down on him.

"Hello, Sam," he said, and tried to raise himself up on one elbow.

To his astonishment his voice was scarcely more than a whisper, and he found it quite impossible to stir.

"What the devil's the matter with me?" he muttered.

"Nothin'—now," responded Tuttle laconically. "Doc said yesterday yore fever was goin' down, an' he thought yuh 'd be all right now, pervidin' yuh did n't do nothin' foolish."

Drummond stared at him, his heavy brows meeting above the ridge of his straight nose. "Yesterday!" he repeated in a bewildered tone. "How in time did yuh get a doctor here yesterday? It must of been noon when I——" He broke off, overwhelmed by a sudden thought. "How long have I been lyin' here?" he demanded.

Tuttle hesitated an instant. "A week last Wednesday," he returned slowly. "You was all in, too, believe me! We could n't get hold o' Doc Maynard till next mornin'. He said a fellah treated himself like yuh done had n't any right to be alive a-tall."

"Aw, shucks!" muttered Dirk. "There was nothin' but a hole bored in m' shoulder."

"Which got infected, or somethin'," Tuttle informed him. "You 'd lost a whale of a lot o' blood, an' on top o' that yuh got fever an' went off yore nut. Enough to croak anybody exceptin' a hard-shelled ol' terrapin like you. Well, yuh

pulled through, an' that 's the main thing. Great Godfrey! Here I 'm gabbin' away like any old woman, an' Doc said yuh was to be kep' quiet. If there 's anythin' yuh want, spit it out quick, cause I 'm gonna leave yuh to go to sleep again."

Dirk was mildly surprised at his willingness to let Tuttle depart without any further altercation. He was still more surprised, during the days that followed, at the slowness of his recovery. Unaccustomed to illness of any sort, he did not understand how tremendously his vitality had been dragged down. It was several days before he could leave his bed, and more than a week later before he began to feel anything like his old self again.

The period of his recovery was no doubt prolonged by any lack of stress as to his future movements. He had failed in his endeavor to extract the information he wanted from Gus Sheckler, who, it appeared, had come out of the fracas at Bear Creek with nothing worse than a shattered knee; and what lay before him was more or less indefinite. He must, of course, return to Hidden Valley to exchange the borrowed roan for his sorrel Jerry, but after that—what?

He had no hope that Hanby's vigilance would ever be relaxed or his venom softened. Hanby

he knew too well even to consider the possibility of his being allowed to settle down peacefully within the boundaries of Fremont County. Sooner or later the owner of Bar Two would be on his trail, and unless he put himself quite beyond his enemy's reach he would never have a moment's safety or peace of mind.

There had been a time, and that not so very long ago, when Drummond had been rather keen about journeying to the great Southwest cattle country. More than once, indeed—especially along in February when the mountain and valleys lay blanketed with snow and the temperature hovered for weeks on end around the zero-point—his thoughts had dallied pleasantly with visions of a blazing, sun-drenched land where it was always summer. He had no family ties to make a permanent uprooting difficult, his only surviving relative being an elderly maiden aunt living in Chicago, to whom he wrote dutifully about once a year—when he remembered. As a matter of fact, when he left Bar Two that night with the brutally treated sorrel he had turned his face southward at once, and theoretically there was nothing now to prevent his continuing the interrupted journey.

Nothing, that is, save the memory of a shapely oval face, the clear blood glowing beneath its

golden tan, a sweet, firm mouth, a pair of wistful deep-blue eyes shadowed by wavy masses of golden hair. Tenuous, intangible, the vision yet held Drummond like meshed steel. Over and over again he told himself that no woman, especially a girl like this, would dream of linking her fate with a convicted outlaw and fugitive from justice. Indeed, he had no intention of ever putting the question. But when it came to definitely and finally placing a thousand miles and more between them—to realizing what it would mean never to see her face again, never even to hear of her—Dirk's whole nature rose up in stubborn, passionate protest.

"Damn Jed Hanby, an' Sheckler, too!" he reflected in bitter impotent anger. Then his thoughts shifted abruptly. "If only I could locate that Roach fellah!"

"Huh?" grunted Stub Jackson inquiringly.

Drummond jerked his head up and a slow flush mantled his face. He was standing beside the kitchen window, out of which he had been staring blindly at the cool green of the firs that clustered around the cabin. Over by the stove Jackson was engaged in a leisurely, methodical preparation of dinner for two, Tuttle having ridden in to Painted

Post early that morning for supplies and possible mail.

"What 'd yuh say?" growled Dirk, wondering uneasily how much of his mental ponderings had been voiced aloud.

"That 's what I ast yuh." Stub flopped the sizzling steak expertly. "What Roach was yuh referrin' to?"

"Why, Bill Roach, o' course. The fellah who was foreman for Hen Twitchell years ago at the Cross Box. Lord knows, I 've talked enough about him an' Sheckler, an' all the rest of it since I been here.

Jackson shoved the steaming coffee-pot to the back of the stove and turned around.

"Sheckler—yes," he drawled. "But this is the first time yuh mentioned any Roach in my hearin'. What 's he gotta do with the price o' beef?"

Somewhat incredulous that he had really failed to relate it before, Dirk briefly narrated the details of Roach's connection with the long defunct and crooked Cross Bar outfit, his reappearance years afterward in Butte, and expressed disgruntlement toward Hanby, ending with a profane lament at the hopelessness of locating a man who had been missing for upward of two years.

Stub listened attentively but made no comment until he had carried steak and coffee over to the rough deal table and set them down. Then he glanced at Drummond.

"There 's a fellah named Roach over on the Lazy Y," he drawled. "His front name 's Bill, too."

Drummond stared at him with widening, incredulous eyes. "What!" he exclaimed. "Yuh mean—Ferguson's outfit, twenty miles or so north?"

Jackson nodded. "Only Lazy Y I know of around these parts," he answered dryly.

Dirk's face suddenly flamed crimson; his black eyes sparkled with an eager light.

"Well, go on!" he urged. "What about him? What 's he look like? How long 's he been there? How old is he? Spit it all out, can't yuh?

"Shore, if yuh gimme time. He 's around forty-five, I 'd say, tall, an' kinda skinny, with a thin face an' sandy hair goin' gray. Been there three, four months, an' Furgie seems right pleased with him, so he must be an A-one cattleman. I seen him a coupla times, an' it comes to me now he was grouchin' onct in the bunk-house about prospectin' all through the Snake River range an' not havin' a smitch o' luck."

CHAPTER XIV

DIRK RIDES

DRUMMOND's eyes narrowed, and his hands gripped the chair-back with unconscious force.

"Blue blazes!" he ejaculated excitedly. "Would n't that knock yuh cold!"

"Not half so cold as this chuck 'll be if we don't light into it," returned the matter-of-fact Jackson, dropping into his seat and vigorously attacking the steak. "Hand over yore plate an' pour the coffee."

But, despite his manner, at bottom he was interested enough. Having sampled the steak, he leaned back in his chair and regarded Drummond with twinkling eyes.

"Looks like he was yore bird," he commented, jaws working vigorously. "Funny yuh did n't mention him before."

"I thought I had," shrugged Drummond. "I s'pose not havin' the least notion I 'd ever meet up with him made me careless. Well!" He chuckled delightedly. "I 'll mosey over there first

thing tomorrow. Mebbe I got a chance after all of runnin' a whizzer on old Hanby."

Tuttle, returning late in the afternoon with a load of supplies, was greeted with the news, and for half an hour or more the three discussed various plans of approaching Roach, who might possibly—Tuttle and Jackson thought—share Sheckler's distaste for having his past dragged into the light of day. Drummond did not agree with them.

"He 'll come acrost all right," he declared confidently. "Mis' Foulkes says he had a run-in with Hanby an' this here Twitchell, an' coddles a grouch yet. I 'll bet he 'll spill out everythin' he knows an' be glad o' the chance to get square."

"Mebbe," commented Tuttle with a shrug. "Still an' all, yuh can't never tell. He might—— By gee! I plumb forgot to tell you fellahs what I heard in town. George Sherwood 's gone an' croaked."

"*What?*"

"Shore thing. It happened two-three days ago. Seems he tried to rope a steer on the prod an' got throwed off his hoss. Lit on his head, they say, an' never spoke another word."

There was silence for a moment, broken presently by Stub Jackson.

"Too darn bad," he commented in a slightly lowered tone. "He was a pretty decent sort, George was, though powerful easy-goin' an' shiftless. Well! That's the end of the old Double Circle, I reckon. It was mortgaged up to the hilt, an' now Hanby 'll swallow it, hook, line, an' sinker."

"He's done it a'ready, if yuh can believe all yuh hear," returned Tuttle. "Horned in right away an' took complete charge. He brought a bunch of his men over, an' has been spendin' most of his time there ever since. I 'm plumb sorry for that girl o' Sherwood's. Seems she 's been holdin' Jed off for some while, but now it looks like she 'd have to take him or be turned outa house an' home."

"What in hell do yuh mean by that stuff?" suddenly demanded Drummond hoarsely. "Why should she have to take him? Why, she would n't look at——"

He paused, his face a mingling of anger, bewilderment, and disbelief. Tuttle stared at him in surprise.

"What 's bitin' yuh, anyhow?" he inquired. "I'm only tellin' yuh what I heard from Sandy Crutcher, an' he oughta know, seein' as he got most of it off'n that Pritchard fe-male."

Drummond swallowed hard. "What else did he say?" he demanded curtly. "Spill out the whole of it."

"There ain't a powerful lot more to tell. Accordin' to the widder, Jed took a shine to the girl first time he saw her an' kep' comin' over every two-three days. She turned him down, an' he kep' on pesterin' her. Got Sherwood on his side, too, the old dame says, an' the very day before the accident he was doin' his best to make her say she 'd take the sucker. Taunted her with not havin' a penny to bless herself with an' all that. Say!" he interjected, "would n't it be rejoicin' to have an old gossip like that around spendin' her time with her ears glued to keyholes an' all? Well, since then Jed 's been makin' the most of his time, an' it looks like he 'd win out. Sandy says she 's a darn nice girl, but different, sort of, from the girls around these parts. Havin' no relatives or money, an' with her friends all way off East, he allows there ain't anything for her to do but take Hanby."

"Why don't Sandy's wife or somebody take her in?" demanded Stub Jackson hotly. "They must be a hot bunch of——"

"They ain't wishin' to get on the wrong side o' Hanby, I expect," interrupted Tuttle. "For all

he 's such a skunk, yuh gotta admit he 's got a heap o' influence, an'——" He broke off and stared after Drummond, who had turned suddenly on his heel and was striding toward the open door. "Hey, there!" he called in surprise. "Where yuh goin'?"

Dirk turned on them a face that was hard and set and determined. "Over to the Double Circle," he answered curtly.

"Great Godrey! Are yuh plumb dotty? Did n't yuh hear me say Jed put in most of his time there?"

Drummond paused in the doorway. "I 'll take a chance," he returned briefly. "Lookit. When I was hog-tied on the floor o' Sherwood's office with not more than six or eight hours between me an' a lynchin'-party, that girl come an' cut me loose. What kind of a coyote would I be to set here an' let her throw herself away on Jed Hanby jest because there ain't nobody with guts enough to help her get away from him?"

"Yo're shoutin', man," agreed Jackson laconically, and Tuttle's face expressed complete agreement. "There ain't nothin' else to do. Me an' Sam 'll come along."

Drummond hesitated doubtfully. "I 'm much obliged, Stub, but I reckon I 'd better handle this

alone," he said. "With a bunch o' Bar Two men there, we can't very well make a raid an' carry her off by force. It 'll mean holing up somewhere near an' gettin' word to her secret, an' all that. In a game like that one man 'll be better than three."

"Mebbe yo're right," conceded Jackson regretfully. "I shore would like to have a hand in trippin' Jed up, though. What yuh aimin' to do if yuh pull it off?" he went on hesitatingly. "You could n't bring her here, I s'pose?"

"No. I'd take her over to Hidden Valley. If I ain't awful wrong, Jennie Foulkes 'll cotton to her fine."

The eyes of both men lit up. "Hot dawg!" chuckled Tuttle. "An' if old Jed comes nosin' around on the trail he won't get no change outa Jennie, believe me. Here! You pile some grub into yuh an' I 'll saddle yore hoss. Stub 'll put up some cold chuck for yuh to take along. Yuh may need it before yo're through."

Without waiting for a reply, he pushed past Drummond and hurried toward the corral. When he returned, leading the saddled roan, Dirk had just stepped out of the house, his jaws still working vigorously. Stub Jackson, carrying a small paper package, was close behind.

Inside of two minutes this had been tucked into the saddle-pocket and Drummond was riding rapidly along the edge of the meadow toward the entrance of the valley. The great crimson sun hung low above a line of saw-toothed mountains to the westward. Just as he swung into the trail and urged the roan southward at a brisk lope, it dropped out of sight, painting the drifting clouds flame-colored, and sending out brilliant red-gold streamers which stretched half-way across the heavens.

CHAPTER XV

FOR THE SAKE OF A GIRL

THAT same golden sphere was well up in the east when Drummond, after some careful reconnoitering, rode out upon the lower reaches of the Crater Notch trail. With a far-seeing prudence that had cost him not a little effort of self-control, he had refrained from reckless riding and allowed himself about three hours sleep during the night. On awakening, just before dawn, he ate the food he had brought and, plunging his face into a mountain spring, set off revived and fresh with few of the signs of fatigue and strain one might have expected in a man so lately risen from a sick-bed.

He planned to ride, if possible, to a point where the trail dipped into the valley about a mile and a half from the Double Circle ranch-house. Here he could safely hide his horse and go forward on foot, keeping to the shelter of the broken country to the left of the trail. It might not be possible to get a word privately with Anne Sherwood until

nightfall, but Dirk had a feeling somehow that he wanted to reach as quickly as possible a place where he could overlook what went on about the ranch. There was no telling when the girl's resolution might be broken down, and Hanby was cur enough to take instant advantage of her slightest weakness.

Pushing his horse, Drummond rode through the notch and started briskly down the other side. About a third of the way from the summit the trail swung abruptly to the left around a boldly jutting mass of rock, just beyond which lay the entrance to a sloping little gully—that same gully, indeed, which had been indirectly the cause of his first meeting with Anne Sherwood and of the whole coil of circumstance that followed. Dirk had almost reached this point when his quick ear caught the sounds of a horse coming up the slope.

Swiftly he reined the roan close in against the rock and halted him. With the same movement, almost, he drew his gun, and, with narrowed eyes riveted on the spot where the rider would first appear, sat motionless, waiting.

The invisible horse came on swiftly, evidently being urged by a rider who was in a hurry. Once he stumbled and recovered with a scrape and clatter of hoofs against the rocky trail. Now Dirk

could hear his heaving snort, and his muscles tensed a little. An instant later the head of a scrubby little cow-pony came into view, and he found himself staring unbelievingly into the strained, startled face of—Anne Sherwood!

The girl stared, too, as if she was looking on a ghost. Then a wave of brilliant color flooded her pale face, creeping up to the very roots of her fair hair.

"*You!*" she cried tremulously. "I thought—I had no idea—I was afraid it was——"

Her voice faltered, ceased, and one gloved hand lifted for an instant as if to still the furious beating of her heart. It was all so like that first meeting, even to the drawn pistol, that she was dazed, bewildered. And just as he had then thrust away the weapon with that lightning movement, Drummond did so now. But as he reined his horse closer to her his lips curved in a reassuring grin, and Anne was aware of a sudden immense and comforting relief. She had never seen him smile before, and even in her stress and panic she found a moment in which to wonder at the amazing transformation it wrought in his rather stern face.

"This shore is luck, ma'am," he said, as he

halted beside her. "I never thought to meet up with yuh—out here."

She stared at him in surprise. "You—you were coming to see—me?" she asked in a puzzled tone.

"Well, yes; in a way, I was," he answered with some embarrassment. "You see——"

He paused. With a sudden start the girl had glanced back nervously over one shoulder.

"Would you—would you mind—riding along with me?" she faltered. "I—I'm in a—hurry."

He acquiesced readily, and, turning his horse, he rode beside her up the slope. Without meeting her glance directly, he was aware of her puzzled, curious regard, and yet he could not seem to find at once the proper words of explanation. Suppose Sam had got the whole story wrong. Suppose she was not in need of help at all? In that case would she not be likely to regard his impulsive action as an impertinence?

"Well?" she questioned suddenly. "You—you must n't blame me for being—a little curious."

Glancing swiftly sidewise, he found that she was smiling—a faint, encouraging, and very far from mirthful smile, which suddenly put heart into him and made him take the plunge.

"It 's—it 's this way, ma'am," he said quickly. "I been laid up for a couple of weeks an' only heard last night that you—you was in—trouble. I 'm plumb sorry about yore uncle, ma'am; I shore am. He—he was——"

He hesitated, finding it even more difficult than he had expected to express himself. Watching him, Anne realized that something besides mere shyness lay beneath his embarrassment and tried to help him out.

"Thank you," she said gently. "It 's awfully good of you to think of me. But surely you did n't take all this risk just—to tell me that?"

"No, ma'am, I did n't," he answered briefly. Drawing a deep breath, he went on rapidly: "I heard yuh was up against it—hard; that—Hanby was pesterin' yuh, an' yuh—yuh had n't any way o' gettin' shed o' him. Mebbe I 'm dead wrong, an' likely you 'll think I got a whale of a nerve. But after what yuh did for me—— Well, I jest saddled up quick last night an' come right over. I got a woman friend with a ranch back in the hills; Mrs. Foulkes is her name. She 's sorta rough seemin', but she 's pure gold down at bottom, an' when I told her how yuh helped me get away she said it seemed like yuh was a—a person after her own heart, an' she 'd like to meet up

with yuh. I 'm dead shore she 'd welcome yuh an' take yuh in, an' she hates Jed Hanby, so you 'd be quite safe with her. If you 'll let me bring yuh over there, I 'll—I 'll——"

He paused, crimson with embarrassment, and shot a furtive glance at the girl beside him. Her face was averted and faintly flushed, and her prolonged silence struck Drummond with acute dismay.

"I 'm sorry, ma'am, if I 've gone an' done somethin' to annoy yuh," he faltered. "Likely I 'm dead wrong, an' Sam got the whole thing twisted. But——"

"You're not wrong." She turned her face suddenly, and to his horror he saw that her lips were quivering and her eyes wet with tears. "Everything you 've said is true—and more." Her right hand suddenly lifted and dropped, clenched, on the saddle-horn. "I—I 'm running away from —him, now."

He was unable wholly to keep the disappointment from his eyes. "You—got some place to go, then?"

"No. I 'm just going—anywhere. I could n't bear it another instant. He 's there—all the time. Every minute of the day I 've got to see him, listen to his—wheedling and—and veiled threats. Mrs.

Pritchard, too—— They 're all trying to force me—— This morning I had a chance. The men all went off to one of the pastures. I slipped out and saddled up Tommy. I 'd made up my mind to ride as far as I could and—and hide myself. Perhaps I could find some place where I 'd get —work. Anything would be better than staying there."

Drummond's eyes sparkled. "Gee! That 's great! Then yuh ain't—mad at me for buttin' in?"

She looked at him oddly. "Mad? How could I be? I think——" Her voice faltered and she bit her lip. "Some day perhaps I 'll be able to tell you what I think," she finished with an effort.

"Yo 're willin' I should take you to Mrs. Foulkes?"

She nodded. "Why not, if you 're sure she wants me?"

"She 'll want yuh, all right." Dirk laughed boyishly. "That 's settled then. We better be wrigglin' along. How long do yuh reckon it would be before Hanby an' his bunch got back to the house?"

"I don't know. I had an idea they might be gone for several hours—unless Mrs. Pritchard went out and told them. She saw me ride away.

I told her I was going for a little canter, but she seemed rather suspicious. She 's been on his side from the first. She 's a rather hateful woman, I think."

"You said it," agreed Drummond emphatically. "We better get some steam up. It 's quite a spell to Hidden Valley."

They had been riding briskly enough, but now Dirk urged his horse to greater speed, and the girl followed suit. With occasional brief periods of rest, they kept this up until they reached the point where the track to Hidden Valley branched off the wider, more traveled trail.

The roan stood the pace excellently, but, toward the end especially, Anne's pony showed signs of faltering. Dirk observed it without comment. But a faint, worried wrinkle dodged into his forehead as he suggested a brief halt at the juncture of the trails. The worst of the journey was still before them. Of course there might be no pursuit at all; but if there was, and the pony could not stand the racket—— Well, no use crossing bridges before one came to them.

From the direction of the Notch there was no sign or sound of pursuit. But just as they were turning into the Hidden Valley trail, Dirk, glancing in the opposite direction, discovered a solitary

horseman, who looked a little like Sandy Crutcher, about a quarter of a mile away.

Stifling an exclamation of annoyance, he hurried the girl on until a thicket of tamarack hid them from view. There was little doubt that the man had seen them, but Crutcher or any other casual wayfarer would have no inclination or excuse for horning into the game. Unfortunately, however, if he should meet a crowd from the Double Circle the chances were about a hundred to one against his keeping silent regarding the encounter.

The trail they now followed was narrow, rough, and more than a little difficult. It wound crookedly over hills and across mountain slopes, dipped into valleys, skirted the edges of precipices, traversed cañons, or followed the stony beds of ancient watercourses. There was little chance for conversation. Anne's mind was fully occupied with her horse, which Drummond also watched critically in the intervals when she was not listening or glancing back along their course.

A persistent, unwonted sense of foreboding had come over him, which stubbornly refused to yield to any amount of reasoning. He told himself that so far there had not been the slightest sign of

pursuit, that really there was no cause for anxiety or alarm. And then his eyes would fall on the heaving sides of the pony in front of him, or his mind flashed back to that unfortunate encounter at the junction of the trails, and the troubled furrow dodged back into his forehead again.

Came a moment when, having covered more than half the distance to Hidden Valley, they halted briefly on the crown of a ridge to rest the girl's exhausted mount. The slopes about them were singularly bare of timber, mere jumbles of jutting rock, with here and there a scanty earth-pocket that supported only bunch-grass and a few sparse, hardy mountain flowers. Behind them the trail was visible for a good mile, ribboning down into a valley and curving up the slope beyond. Anne's pony was just beginning to breathe with some approach to comfort when all at once she gave a startled cry.

"Oh!" she gasped, pointing to the farther ridge. "Look!"

Dirk turned swiftly in his saddle, and his eyes narrowed. Up over the curving slope a horseman had dashed into view, with another close at his heels. Behind him came another and another still until Drummond counted eight of them advancing steadily in single file along the trail.

"Steady," he said quietly in answer to the girl's frightened, appealing look. "They 're a good ways off yet. Let 's go."

Anne's shoulders stiffened, and her chin went up. Tightening the reins, she touched the weary horse with her heel and headed him down the farther side of the ridge. It was an uncommonly nasty descent, the narrow track littered with loose stones and sloping sharply. But she guided the pony skilfully, and they had almost reached the bottom when the animal stumbled, lurched forward, and fell to his knees.

Throwing all her strength against the bit, Anne dragged him to his feet. For an instant he stood still, trembling. Then he took a few limping steps forward and again stopped.

Hastily Anne slid out of her saddle and bent over his off fore foot. Dirk quickly dismounted also, and as he reached her side she straightened slowly, her face a white mask of despair.

"He 's lamed himself," she said, a little quiver in her voice. "He won't carry me half a mile; he could n't." Her hands dropped limply to her sides. There was a momentary mental struggle, which ended in that characteristic, determined uptilt of her shapely chin. "You must go on," she said swiftly, her voice quite steady now.

"They won't do anything to me but—take me back. But you——"

A fleeting light, tender and full of tribute and appreciation, glowed for an instant in Drummond's somber eyes.

"Don't talk nonsense," he told her quietly. "They 're not goin' to take yuh back. I 've got an idea. Listen! You take the roan an' hustle on to Hidden Valley. Tell Mrs. Foulkes what 's happened and get her to send the foreman out with a bunch of men."

"But—you——" she protested.

"I 'll be all right. There 's a place ahead, not two hundred yards, where the trail narrows between two steep cliffs and then takes a sharp turn. With a six shooter an' a bunch o' shells, a fellah could hold up that crowd back there for any length o' time; that is, as long as the light holds. The Hidden Valley men 'll come up long before dark. That 's true stuff, ma'am. Here; let me help yuh up, an' we 'll get goin'."

A trifle dubiously she mounted the roan and rode along the hollow and up the sharp, steep slope beyond, Dirk following with the limping cow-pony. The sight of that narrow opening between two frowning bulwarks seemed to reassure her a little, and Drummond's manner gave her

even greater confidence. When they had passed through the opening he told her how to reach the ranch and with that same easy assurance bade her a casual good speed. But when she had gone, leaving only the memory of her troubled, wistful scrutiny and that brief, firm pressure of her gloved hand in his, Dirk's assumed carelessness dropped from him like a cloak.

Hastily drawing his six-shooter, he inspected the loaded cylinder carefully. Thrusting the weapon back into its holster, he took hold of a good-sized boulder and with much straining managed to roll it over to one side of the trail where it turned abruptly just inside the opening. Adding another stone or two, he surveyed the improvised shelter critically before dropping down behind it and neatly arranging a score of loaded shells in a row within easy reach of his hand. That done, he lay back on one elbow, and his glance swept thoughtfully over the opening and the surrounding cliffs to rest at last, dubiously, on the lower and more open rear.

"That 's the weak point," he murmured. "I can hold 'em this side till the cows come home, but once they get around in back—they 've got me. I wonder how long it 'll be before they find that out?"

CHAPTER XVI

AT THE FORK OF THE TRAIL

MOUNTED on the roan, Anne followed the trail along the floor of the narrow, rock-girt cañon, her mind torn by conflicting emotions. The mere thought of again facing Jed Hanby filled her with horror. She had put every scrap of will-power and determination she possessed into this desperate effort to escape, and was only too well aware that if she failed the persistent owner of the Bar Two outfit would see to it that she never had another chance. On the other hand, to ride away like this, leaving Drummond there to bear the brunt of Hanby's double fury, seemed the act of a coward and a weakling. She risked only her liberty, whereas Drummond's life hung in the balance. Ought she not to have insisted on staying? Was it really true that without risk he could hold up the pursuers until she had time to return with help?

Toward the bottom of the cañon a straggling clump of jack-pines found precarious root at the

foot of a low, receding hill. Here Anne suddenly reined in her horse and glanced back through the interlacing branches. Drummond was engaged in pushing a large boulder down the slope toward the opening of the cañon. Something about his swift, sure, capable movements brought to the girl a sudden, clearer realization of the situation. Even had she turned stubborn and insisted in remaining, she knew intuitively that nothing on earth would stir him from the spot.

"He 'd never go!" she murmured, the blood rising warmly into her face. "I wonder I even dared suggest it."

And swiftly on the heels of this came the realization that he had not sent her on to Hidden Valley merely to get her out of danger, though that, perhaps, might have been his chief object. He counted definitely on her to bring him help; and if she failed——

Anne caught her breath and roweled the roan with a spur. He was depending on her, and, with the very minutes precious, she sat here wasting time.

"What a fool I am!" she muttered between clenched teeth. "I—I hope he did n't see me—dawdling."

And swiftly thrusting every other thought from

her mind, she bent to the task of extracting the last possible ounce of speed from the gallant animal.

At home, from childhood in the saddle, she could have given points to many a born and bred ranch girl. She knew horses intimately, and this was fortunate, for she needed all her skill and canny intuition to keep the roan to his task without running risks of foundering him.

Skittish at first and doubtful of this strange, new rider, the horse soon found that there was no weak, uncertain mind back of that small gloved hand that held the bridle. The soothing voice, the gentle quirps and murmurs of encouragement, though novel, were not, he presently discovered, unpleasant. He came to know, too, that though this unfamiliar person in the saddle would stand no nonsense, she seemed to understand the precise moment when further urgence would have become a torture.

Anne, on her part, in her turn observed only too soon that the roan, though a beast of mettle and spirit, had lately been ridden fast and far. Under her skilful urging he did his gallant best; but it was with the flagging energy of a horse who is well-nigh spent. His spurts of speed grew briefer; the intervals between them maddeningly

lengthened. Anne realized that he was doing his best, but it needed the greatest effort of self-restraint to refrain from a further use of quirt and spur, even though in her heart she knew it would be worse than futile.

In this wise, with alternate bursts of speed and lagging, Anne followed the twisting intricacies of the rough trail. Sometimes scarcely visible, again broad and plain enough, this ribboned through the desolate mountain country, always following the line of least resistance.

More than once the girl had a sudden, sinking conviction that she had lost her way. But inevitably the narrow track reappeared again, until at last, just beyond the entrance to a shallow gulch, it forked abruptly.

Anne pulled up, her eyes brightening. Drummond had told her of this fork and cautioned her to take the left-hand branch. The other, she remembered, twisted off through the mountains to emerge finally in the thriving county-seat of Ogden.

"The valley can't be so very much farther now," she murmured, turning the roan.

Not more than a hundred yards beyond the fork, the trail took a sudden twist around a clump

of cottonwoods. Anne wondered if there could be a spring back of them. It seemed as if she heard a faint trickle of water, and instinctively she reined in her horse. An instant later she caught her breath sharply and stared wide-eyed with blanching face at the man standing beside a dun-colored cayuse who barred the way.

He seemed quite as much surprised as she, but recovered himself more swiftly. He was of medium height, with a thin, narrow face dominated by a pair of keen dark eyes set rather too close together. It was a familiar face, and no deep delving into the soil of memory was necessary for Anne to recall him as a man named Gowdy who had come several times recently during her enforced detention at the Double Circle to see—Jed Hanby!

"Howdy, ma'am," he greeted her curtly, his bright eyes filled with mingled surprise and curiosity. "Ain't yuh a mite far from home?"

Anne moistened her dry lips and gripped the reins with unconscious force. She knew him for an intimate of the owner of Bar Two, and felt him quite capable, if his suspicions were once aroused, of detaining her, or even taking her back to the creature she had fled from. What to do

or say? She must act instantly or he would begin to wonder. With a supreme effort of will she stilled her quivering nerves—and smiled.

"I—— You—— It quite startled me to come on you so unexpectedly," she murmured. "You see, I have n't met—a soul since I left the ranch, just after breakfast."

"Thasso? Huh! An' yo're headin' for——"

He paused expectantly, his searching gaze still fixed intently on her face. Anne did not hesitate.

"A place called Hidden Valley," she returned calmly. "I 'm going to spend the night with Mrs. Foulkes. This *is* the right way, is n't it?"

For a moment he did not answer but continued to stare with some perplexity. "Mrs. Foulkes?" he repeated slowly, ignoring her question. "Does —Jed know about it?"

Her eyebrows lifted. "Mr. Hanby?" she questioned. "Why, of course!"

With what an effort she forced that look of mild surprise, that tone of casual calmness, no one would ever know. Nor did she hesitate or quibble at the lie. She was fighting desperately not only for her own freedom but even more for Drummond's life, and against that what mattered truth or falsehood or anything on earth?

"You don't suppose I 'd leave the ranch with-

out his knowing, do you?" she went on convincingly.

Instantly she realized her mistake. Intimate as he was at the Double Circle, Gowdy must be fully aware of her feeling of acute antagonism for Jed Hanby. He must know perfectly that she would not feel the slightest obligation to inform the man she hated of any step she meant to take, even if it were merely an over-night visit. Conscious of the rising tide of color in her face, equally and poignantly aware of the swift suspicion leaping into the black eyes that regarded her across the empty saddle of the dun, Anne strove hastily to repair her error.

"Is—is there a—spring back there?" she asked a little breathlessly. "I—thought I heard it running. I—I 'm almost—parched with thirst."

His expression told her that she had failed completely. He meant to stop her going on—might even force her to ride back with him to—Hanby! Terror seared her soul, and her mind flashed swiftly back to the narrow cañon where Drummond lay behind his improvised bulwark. She did not doubt his ability to hold his own as long as the daylight held. What tortured her beyond endurance was the thought of those treacherous, creeping shadows, of the final darkness fall-

ing swiftly, of exhausted ammunition, above all else of his listening, hoping, waiting for the help she had promised and which now would never come.

That was what cut through her like a knife, rousing her courage and determination to a white heat, sharpening her wits. She must escape—she must! There were no two ways about it. Her gaze, fixed on Gowdy's keen face, hardened, flashed for an instant over the dun horse standing close to her and less than a length ahead, and suddenly she saw a way.

Pausing only to draw a swift breath, she jabbed spurs into the roan, who leaped forward with a startled snort. As she swept past the dun her outstretched hand clutched and held the trailing bridle-reins. For a ghastly moment she thought she was going to be dragged out of her saddle. But, catching the horn with her right hand and gripping with her knees, she managed to retain her seat, and, still spurring the roan, galloped on down the trail dragging the dun with her.

CHAPTER XVII

NERVE

AN ANGRY yell, twice repeated, only spurred her on. Not more than a score of yards ahead the trail curved sharply around a massive pile of rock. If only she could reach that bend——

Suddenly a pistol spat, and she heard the whine of a bullet close overhead. She had a feeling that Gowdy had purposely shot wild to frighten her, and with a curiously impersonal coolness she wondered where the next one would strike. As she sent the roan flying around the granite buttress a bullet splintered on the rock beside her so close that a sharp leaden fragment bit into her shoulder with painful force.

"He meant to hit the horse!" she found herself panting aloud. "Oh, hurry—hurry!" She gave the roan a single sharp lash with her quirt. "Don't you know that unless we get around that turn you 're done for?"

His panting snort, the sight of his laboring, sweat-lathered sides, brought a tremor to the lips that until this moment had kept their firm-

ness. "I don't *mean* to be cruel," she went on with a stifled sob. "It 's only that you *must* keep up!"

The dun, abandoning a futile attempt to balk, clattered along behind her. Anne had twisted his bridle around her wrist, and, despite the pain of leather cutting against the tender flesh, she held it firmly. She did not dare look back. Her very soul in her eyes, she kept her gaze set on the mass of pines that marked the second sharp twist in the trail. When at length the gallant roan stumbled panting into safety, the girl slumped forward in her seat and began to sob softly.

It was only the inevitable snapping of taut nerves, and a moment or two later she was pulling herself together. Shaking the tears from her eyes with a determined movement of her head, she bent forward and touched the roan's neck caressingly with the hand that held the bridle.

"You—poor darling!" she murmured unsteadily. "Just a tiny second, now, to rest, and then we must go on."

For upward of two miles further she kept her hold on the dun's bridle. Then, observing that his stubborn dragging back was only making it harder for her own mount, she untwisted the reins and let them drop.

He took a few short strides after her and stopped. Glancing back, she saw him standing motionless in the middle of the trail, long gaunt face turned inquiringly toward her. When another bend took them presently out of sight, he was still standing undecided, and Anne drew a long breath of relief. Barring accidents or obstacles entirely unforeseen, she felt herself safe from any further interference on the part of Russ Gowdy.

Happily no fresh difficulties turned up to delay her progress. To be sure, the way seemed endless, and she was tortured by the constant fear that her exhausted horse would collapse under her. But at length a long, irregular line of drooping, pale-green willows loomed ahead, the trail swerved around to parallel the stream, and finally the whole broad level of the valley spread out before her.

How long it was since she had left Drummond, Anne had no notion. It seemed interminable hours, though the sun was still well up above the saw-toothed line of peaks that marked the western horizon. Striving to keep a hold upon her tattered nerves, she urged the exhausted roan on toward the dotting buildings and corrals that looked so far away. If only some one with a

fresh horse would see her and dash out to meet her and carry back the news!

But no one did. Anne failed to see a single soul until the roan, foam-flecked, sides heaving, flaming nostrils diliated, stumbled around the corner of a long, low shed and halted quivering not far from a short, stocky figure in high laced boots and an abbreviated skirt whose sharp dark eyes were bent on the pair with sudden, keen interest.

Anne threw the reins over the horse's head and flung herself from the saddle. Her knees were weak and shaking, but she managed to keep a hold on herself and stumbled toward the woman, who was moving swiftly to meet her.

"You 're—Mrs. Foulkes!" she gasped out. "Drummond——"

At the touch of that firm, strong arm about her shoulders the girl's strength seemed momentarily to leave her. She had a horrible feeling that she was going to faint before she had time to tell her story.

"I—won't!" she mumbled, white teeth digging cruelly into her under lip. "I can't! I——"

"There! there!" soothed Mrs. Foulkes, sturdily supporting the slender, drooping figure.

"Take it easy. . . . Pete! Lush!" Her voice rose shrilly. *"Water!"*

There followed the thud of feet and a vague sense of stir. But even before the half-spilled dipper of water, brought hastily by a keen-eyed puncher with flaming hair, reached her, Anne had forced herself back to complete consciousness.

"Drummond——" she panted. "My horse—went lame; he gave me—his. He 's back there—in the little cañon—holding off Hanby and his gang. He wants you—to come—— I was held up by Gowdy and——"

Mrs. Foulkes snatched the dipper and with a steady hand held it to the girl's lips.

"You hear?" she shrilled over Anne's shoulder to the three men who had run up. "Throw your saddles on, every one o' yuh, an' make it speedy. Get out my bay. Drummond 's holed some'ers by that skunk, Jed Hanby. . . . Now, dearie—you 're George Sherwood's niece, I expect—which cañon is it?"

Revived by the water and even more by the sense of stir and movement all about her, Anne hurriedly described the location of the narrow cañon where she had left Dirk, and, under Mrs. Foulkes's probing related briefly the details of

her flight and the unfortunate meeting with Russ Gowdy. The manner of her escape from Gowdy seemed to please the older woman not a little.

"Nice work!" she commended heartily, her black eyes snapping. "My soul! I 'll bet Russ 's fair frothing at the mouth bein' set afoot an' gen'ally fooled, an' by a girl at that." She patted Anne's shoulder and gave a short laugh. "Don't yuh worry none. We 'll fan it right down there, an' from what I know of that place Dirk 'll be well able to hold off Hanby's crowd until we come."

"If you 've a fresh horse I could ride, I 'd like awfully to—to go with you," said Anne wistfully. "It would be——"

"Land sakes, no!" cut in Mrs. Foulkes. "Yo're clean wore out now, child; you 'd never stand the gaff. Besides, you 'd hold us up too much. You jest go into the house an' rest up, an'—— Ah! here they come."

With a thud of hoofs a string of capable-looking cow-men swept across the open from the corral. Lush Barton, the foreman, was leading a big, powerful bay, while Darrell likewise had a spare horse in tow. Mrs. Foulkes's eyes brightened, and, with a hurried pat, she left Anne and strode forward.

"Yuh brought one for Dirk, too, huh?" she commented with a humorous glance at the red-headed Darrell as she swung into the saddle. "I 'm glad to see yuh use that head-piece o' yores now an' then for somethin' besides growin' a baby sunset on." She settled her holster and turned to Anne. "Make yoreself comfortable in the house, dearie," she told the girl. "An' like I said, don't fret. We 'll have him back here in two shakes. . . . Now, boys, start a-boilin'."

With a sudden application of quirt and spur, the crowd of mounted men shot forward and swept around the long shed and on across the broad level of the valley. For a space Anne stood motionless, her wistful, anxious gaze following the dust-cloud of their passing. Then her glance shifted to the weary, drooping roan, and her conscience smote her.

"You poor, tired thing!" she murmured, as she approached the horse. "How hateful of me to forget you after all you 've done!"

Taking the bridle, she led the horse toward the corral. At a gap between two buildings she halted a second to follow the swiftly receding figures of the rescue-party sweeping across the plain. Then she went on, her forehead furrowed with troubled lines.

Mrs. Foulkes had been confident and reassuring enough. Indeed, her very personality was a tower of strength, but still Anne could not help worrying. The time had been so long; there were so many things that might have happened. As she stopped beside the corral gate and began to undo the fastening, her hand was trembling.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BLUFF

LONG length flattened to the ground, Drummond sent a little shower of empty brass shells tinkling against the rock and with swift precision reloaded the cylinder from the diminishing row in front of him. The smell of burnt powder was pungent in the air; above his head swirled a faint, dissipating haze of smoke. His eyes blazed; his mouth was set grimly. Along one side of his grimy, sweat-smeared face a slow crimson trickle gave a final, sinister touch to his expression.

For more than two hours he had held that crowd at bay before the thing came which, from the first, he had feared most greatly. That bullet from the rear, though it had merely clipped off a bit of rock two feet above his head, was like the knell of fate, telling him that the game was almost up. He had returned the fire, forcing the unknown to keep behind cover. But he knew that it was only a question of time, and precious little

of it at that, before others would creep up among the rocks behind him to make a swift finish of his defense, and him.

As he lay there, motionless save for the swift, feverish vigilance of his darting eyes, a good many things flashed through his mind. Chiefly, however, he was aware of one keen thrill of triumph and an equally passionate sensation of regret. Whatever came, at least the owner of the Bar Two would never win Anne Sherwood. Dirk knew Jennie Foulkes too well to be in doubt for a single instant as to that. His regret lay in his failure to wring from Sheckler that information about Jed Hanby's shady past. With that in his possession—and it could easily have been comprised in a single sheet of paper sworn before a notary—he could have ended this present hazard in a twinkling. For Hanby, in his staid middle age, clung passionately to the bulwark of respectability he had raised with such painful care through all these years. Rather than have this riddled and overthrown, rather than have his crooked past blazoned before all the world, he would do anything, even to the sparing and rehabilitation of his enemy. Dirk was as sure of this as he was of anything on earth, and more than

once he groaned inwardly at the absence of that effective weapon.

"And to think I might have had that very thing outa Bill Roach if I 'd only had the wit to speak about him sooner." he reflected bitterly. Jest twenty-four hours sooner would 'a' done. You big, thick-skulled lummox! You shore deserve to get yore come-uppance."

And then, quite suddenly, an amazing thought seared through his brain like a dazzling lightning flash. He caught his breath; his eyes widened, then narrowed swiftly. Was it possible? Dare he risk everything on a fantastic chance like that?

A shadowy sense of movement among the rocks behind him caught his eye. Instantly his Colt spat twice. The movement ceased. After all, how little he had to risk! Slowly, perhaps, but with fatal certainty they were surrounding him. The end might come at any moment—suddenly. It must come, he felt, long before he could hope for any help from Hidden Valley.

He raised up on one elbow. Silence lay over the narrow cañon—that silence which breathes of deadly peril, of fierce forces held in momentary check as by the merest packthread. Suddenly

Drummond's voice, clear, ringing, with a trifle of underlying hoarseness, shattered that stillness.

"Hey, you fellahs! What if I give up?"

For a space there was no answer. Then a voice from somewhere beyond the opening laughed scornfully.

"Try another. We ain't bitin' on them kind to-day."

"I ain't foolin'," returned Drummond, his keen glance never ceasing to sweep the rocks behind him. "Yuh got me cornered. There ain't a chance in the world that I can see. If I give up, though, I want a word with Hanby before—anything else happens."

"Huh!" growled the voice of the ranchman. "Yore tongue 's in workin' order. Go to it. I 'll be generous an' give yuh a dozen words if yuh want that many."

"What I got to say ain't the sort of thing a fellah wants shouted around a place like this—with echoes," returned Dirk evenly. "You 'd be the last to thank me if I did, Jed."

Came an uncertain pause. Vividly Drummond pictured the ranch-owner considering this strange demand, wondering, perhaps, whether it had anything to do with the girl he desired so ardently,

or whether it was merely a trap to lure him to destruction.

"Heave yore gun out there in sight, an' mebbe I 'll consider humorin' yuh," he finally conceded.

Promptly Dirk obeyed, and as the weapon clattered out on the rocky floor of the opening another voice spoke warningly.

"Look out, Jed! Likely he 's got another ready to plug yuh with."

"If he has, it ain't in sight. Keep them hands o' yores jest where they are, Drummond, or I 'll bore yuh full o' holes."

The command came from directly overhead. Lying on his side Dirk glimpsed a head and shoulders thrust over the cliff thirty feet above, glimpsed, too, the ominous black bore of a forty-five trained steadily on him. And even while he thrilled inwardly at this unexpected furtherance of his daring scheme, he was chagrined to have been caught napping.

There was a clatter of feet in the opening, and Hanby and three of his men appeared. Drummond was ordered to his feet and swiftly but efficiently searched.

"There ain't nothin 'on him," growled Chuck Wagner, stepping back.

For a moment Hanby regarded the captive in

silence, full lips pursed and bushy brows contracted over the pale-blue, suspicious eyes.

"Well, what yuh gotta say?" he demanded at length.

"If you 'll step over there about twenty feet, I 'll tell yuh," Drummond returned composedly.

Still Hanby hesitated, striving to hide his puzzled curiosity behind a scowl. A grizzled beard of several days' growth covered his square, rough-hewn face; his jaw was thrust slightly forward, his upper lip curling back over broken, discolored teeth. The contrast between this creature and Anne Sherwood's fresh, young loveliness came over Drummond with a fresh sense of anger and repulsion.

"Keep him covered, you fellahs," Hanby snapped at length. If he makes a move, plug him."

Turning on his heel, he tramped off across the cañon with Dirk at his heels. Reaching a point out of ear-shot of his own men, he stopped short and glowered at Drummond.

"Spit it out, if yo're goin' to," he growled. "An' make it snappy. I ain't got no time to waste, believe me!"

"It won't take long," Dirk told him evenly. For an instant he hesitated, standing with legs

apart and thumbs hooked lightly in him chap-belt. His face was cool and careless and assured. "Day before yesterday I saw—Bill Roach," he said suddenly.

Hanby's eyelids fluttered, but his hard stare never wavered. "What 's that to me?" he snapped. "Talk sense, why 'n't yuh?"

"He 's still sore as the devil," pursued Drummond reflectively. "Yuh would n't think a fellah would carry a grudge for twenty-odd years, now, would yuh? But he 's nursed it good. I 'd say he was worse, even, than when he first got handed the dirty deal he tells about by Twitchell an'—his side-partner of the old Cross Box outfit over near Kaysville."

Hanby moved restlessly, and one hairy fist hanging by his side clenched spasmodically. "Yuh better get down to brass tacks," he warned harshly. "I 'm liable to get plumb weary o' this kind o' fool talk mighty sudden. I don't know no Roach, if that 's his name.

"N-o? Well, he knows you, all right." Drummond's eyes narrowed; he spoke rapidly, assuredly. "Accordin' to the statement he swore before Judge Fitch over to Ogden, you an' Hen Twitchell owned the Cross Box together an' split the profits of that rustlin' over in Graham County

twenty years ago. Only then you called yoreself Jed *Hanley.*"

The blood rushed into Hanby's face, a crimson flood, and he made a threatening movement toward Drummond.

"Yuh lie!" he snarled. "I never called myself no Hanley. I never——"

"Oh, yes, yuh did. Jennie Foulkes knew yuh the first time she set eyes on yuh. There 's plenty more in Kaysville would recognize yuh, an' there 's—Gus Sheckler."

Hanby swallowed hard. His teeth were clenched and his eyes raging. "Gus never squealed," he grated furiously, dropping quite suddenly the pose of innocence. "You could n't make him——"

"Mebbe not, but the law could if it was necessary. But I got all I want in that paper, an' Roach is handy by over on the Lazy Y ready an' willin' to stand by his story any time I say the word. It 's up to you to say whether the sheriff gets the facts or not."

The ranchman ground his teeth in impotent fury. Dirk's manner was so easy and assured and he had his facts so pat, that apparently it never occurred to the older man to question the truth of his assertions. Suddenly a cunning look flashed into the ranchman's eyes and vanished.

"You mean—you 'd take that paper to Ogden if——"

Drummond laughed. "Do I really look that much of a fool, Jed? Yuh shore did n't think I had it on me, did yuh? Jennie Foulkes has it safe, an' if anything should—happen to me, she 'll beat it to Ogden as fast as a horse can carry her. She 's got a tongue, too, Jennie has, as likely yuh know. Give her a week an' I 'll bet yuh my outfit to a shoe-string there won't be a soul in all o' Fremont County that won't be gabbin' about how the respectable Jed Hanby got his start rustlin' cattle, an' likely they 'd be makin' up a nice little tar-an'-feather party to run yuh outa the State."

Hanby writhed, and if looks could kill Drummond would have been stricken on the spot. With snarling lips and purple face, he glared at Dirk as if he would have liked to rend him limb from limb.

"What 's—yore price?" he rasped at length.

"A proper bill o' sale for that sorrel," returned Dirk promptly. "I got about thirty dollars back pay due me. That 's all he 's worth."

"S'posin' I give it to yuh, how do I know yuh won't go spreadin' around these—damn lies about me jest the same?"

"You 'll have to take my word for that," re-

turned Drummond with a shrug. "I'll guarantee to keep Roach an' Mrs. Foulkes still, an' not to produce the paper, unless—— Reckon I 'd better save it, though. It might come in handy in case yuh should start some other——"

He broke off abruptly and turned swiftly toward the open end of the cañon. The thudding beat of hoofs, faint at first, but growing swiftly louder, came from that direction. Rapidly the sound increased in volume until all at once a bunch of riders, their wild-eyed ponies rocketing like jack-rabbits, surged into view and swept forward over the rocky cañon floor.

Jennie Foulkes, astride a superb bay, was slightly in the lead. With a jerk of her powerful arm, she halted the horse a few feet away from the two men and, swiftly dismounting, strode forward.

"Well, what 's this? she demanded, her determined chin thrust forward and her eyes snapping. Behind her the Hidden Valley men, six-shooters in hand, ranged in a silent, alert semi-circle. "What deviltry yuh up to now, Jed Hanby?"

"It 's all right, Mrs. Foulkes," interposed Drummond hastily. "I been tellin' him about that paper o' Bill Roach's I left with yuh to

take to Ogden in case anythin' happened to me," he went on in a lowered tone. "He 's decided to lay off me."

Mrs. Foulkes took the cue without the flutter of an eyelash. "He better, if he knows what's good for him," she snapped belligerently. "Believe me, I 'd 'a' took it joyful, an' I 'd likewise gone to some trouble to let folks know what kind of a man yuh are, Jed Hanby."

White with rage and baffled fury, the ranchman turned abruptly on his heel. "Yuh got me this time," he snarled. "But thank Gawd I don't have to listen to no woman's chatter."

"You won't forget that bill o' sale," Drummond called after him. "Yuh can mail it to Hidden Valley. I 'll be there for a day or two."

Hanby's twitching shoulders were the only sign that he had heard. With a curt, oath-besprinkled order, he gathered his men together and disappeared through the narrow entrance of the cañon, to the open disappointment of the Hidden Valley crowd, who evidently panted for a fight. Even Dirk's belated reminder that he was leaving behind the lamed Double Circle pony brought no response.

"Mebbe it belongs to the girl," suggested Mrs. Foulkes. "Anyhow, we 'll take it back with us,

an' he can fetch it afterward if he wants it. Now let 's have the story. I did n't have time to get nothin' outa her. Where in the name o' goodness have yuh been all this time? Where 'd yuh meet up with Bill Roach?"

Dirk grinned. "I did n't, ma'am," he returned. "Yuh see, it was this way——"

"Fine business," approved the lady, when he had given a brief outline of his experiences. She chuckled delightedly. "My soul! If Jed had any notion o' what yuh put over on him he 'd be fit to be tied." She chuckled again and turned toward her horse. "You 'll be in the valley more 'n a day or two," she remarked. "I been thinkin' for some time o' takin' on another hand, an', if the place suits, yo're welcome to it."

"I shore would like that fine, ma'am," said Drummond. "I always did have a hankerin' for that outfit." He hesitated an instant. "Miss Sherwood found yuh all right, then?"

"She did. An' I pretty near had to tie her to keep her from comin' out with us." Her eyes twinkled. "Seems to set a powerful store by yuh, young man. I thought yuh 'd seen her only once before to-day."

Dirk colored faintly and hastened to swing into the saddle of the spare horse.

"Reckon she must 'a' felt sorta responsible, havin' rid off on my cayuse an' all," he mumbled, as Mrs. Foulkes reined her bay alongside him.

"Hum! Mebbe." There was, however, a note of skepticism in the lady's voice. "Well, she seems a nice, sensible girl, an' she shore has spunk enough. Faugh! Whenever I think o' Jed Hanby expectin' to marry the likes o' her, it turns my stomach. However, that 's over an' done with, thank the Lord! I 've a notion to get her to stay on with me at Hidden Valley. I expect I 'll relish some fe-male comp'ny after havin' nothin' but a passel o' men around all these years."

Drummond's glance slanted sideways; there was a twinkle in his black eyes.

"I thought mebbe yuh 'd do that little thing, ma'am," he confessed. "To tell the truth, that 's where we were headin' for when her hoss went lame. I could n't think of nowhere else to take her. O' course," he added, lips stretching in a sudden grin, "yuh may be a mite disappointed. As a talker she can't hold a candle to yore sister-in-law."

Mrs. Foulkes snorted. "*That* gabby!" she ejaculated. "My soul! She 'll talk Tom into his grave, an' so I told him last time I was over.

It 's like turnin' on a tap. If I thought this girl—— Oh! Havin' yore little fun, eh? Well, two can play at that game, smarty, as you 'll find out when we hit the ranch.''

CHAPTER XIX

YEARNINGS

IF SHE had intended carrying on her joking about Drummond and the girl, Mrs. Foulkes abandoned it as they clattered up to the ranch-house. Anne was waiting for them on the porch, and her condition of nerves was such that the older woman promptly hustled her off to bed and devoted the succeeding hour to cooking something tempting and forcing the exhausted girl to eat it.

"Clean wore out, that 's all ails her, " she told Drummond when he strolled into the kitchen toward nine o'clock. "No wonder, neither. I did n't ask no questions, but from what she let fall I expect the poor thing 's been harried for weeks fightin' off that beast Hanby. Her uncle's checkin' in like that tells on her a lot, too, though, between ourselves, she 's a lot better off with him gone. Big as he was, he was like putty with Jed, an' sooner or later the two of 'em would 'a' wore her down in spite of herself."

"Is she—er—goin' to stay?" asked Drummond hesitatingly.

Mrs. Foulkes wrung out a dish-cloth and slapped it on the drain-board.

"For a while, anyhow. I didn't press her. Jest said I 'd like to have her keep me comp'ny. Mebbe she won't like my rough an' ready ways. Yuh can't tell."

Dirk's eyes twinkled. "I wouldn't fret about that none," he told her. "Bein' outspoken is a whole heap better than what she 's had handed out to her over at the Double Circle. Lush tells me the sorrel 's doin' fine," he added.

"Shore," nodded the lady briskly. "Wants to be worked, though. Well, he 'll get plenty o' that now. Yuh can whirl right in an' take hold tomorrow. I 'm goin' to move a bunch o' hosses first thing in the mornin'."

"Can't be none too soon for me," returned Dirk promptly. "Only I was thinkin' it might be a good thing if I went over to see this here Roach an' got that paper Hanby's so scairt about."

Mrs. Foulkes's firm lips twitched suddenly into a reflection of his grin. "That 's right," she admitted, her eyes twinkling. "Well, take the day off an' get it over with. It 'll be a handy little thing to have around the house in case Jed starts

actin' up again. Better get off early if yuh expect to be back by dark."

Her advice coinciding with his own, Dirk was up before dawn and, having skirmished his own breakfast, saddled up and departed about the time the others were beginning to stir.

He reached the Lazy Y before noon, chatted a while with Jim Ferguson in the ranch-house, and then strolled down to the bunk-house about the time the men were sitting down to dinner. During the meal he quietly sized up Bill Roach, a rather disgruntled person who seemed to be perpetually airing a grievance, and decided that with the right handling he would prove reasonable and loosen up. To this end he drew the man aside after dinner and put the proposition to him.

At first the fellow froze, regarding Dirk with extreme suspicion if not hostility. But when Drummond adroitly emphasized the annoyance and embarrassment such a confession would bring to Hanby, Roach thawed. He finally agreed to draw up and sign a statement giving the details of Hanby's intimate connection with the crooked Cross Box outfit. Dirk took the precaution of having his signature witnessed by Ferguson and one of the cow-men, and, with the paper tucked in his inside pocket, departed in high feather.

Mrs. Foulkes, equally pleased with the day's work, promptly locked the document in the old-fashioned safe standing in the living-room. The following day a bill of sale for the sorrel arrived from Hanby without any accompanying comment. It had been properly executed, however, and for several days Dirk carried it around in his pocket. Then, deciding that it was too precious to be subject to even the ordinary risks and hazards of a ranchman's daily life, he took advantage of an idle hour alone in the bunk-house, and placed it, with a small amount of money he had saved up, in a cleverly contrived hiding-place beneath his bunk.

With these two papers safe, a large portion of Drummond's troubles vanished into thin air. Hanby no longer had any hold on him; he was safe to come and go when and where he chose without let or interference from the law. To be sure, in the back of his mind, lay the shrewd suspicion that the thwarted owner of Bar Two, his rage and hate doubled by the manner of his outwitting, would not be slow at seizing any opportunity—or even hesitate to make one if he could—of injuring Drummond. But Dirk, feeling himself a match for the ranchman's cunning, regarded this with more or less indifference. He

kept his eyes open, of course, and was particularly careful that Anne Sherwood ran no special risks. But he was not the sort to allow such nebulous future hazards to interfere with his perfect enjoyment of the present.

For, as the days lengthened into weeks—weeks of placid, shimmering, golden noons and gorgeous starlit nights, passed mostly in the quiet serenity of Hidden Valley—Drummond was, for the most part, perfectly content. He liked his work and his fellow-workers. Jennie Foulkes, though occasionally exigent and exacting, made an excellent boss. And always there was—Anne!

Relieved from the carking cars and nerve-racking anxiety of the last few weeks, she blossomed like a rose. Despite Mrs. Foulkes's brusque, outspoken manner, the girl seemed to take to her at once and showed her liking in shy, unobtrusive ways that evidently pleased the older woman despite her affectation of gruff hardness. Against Jennie's persistent protests she insisted on doing most of the housework, though this did not prevent her from taking long rides that usually had as their objective the part of the ranch where the men happened to be working.

The men, of course, promptly became her devoted slaves. As. Mrs. Foulkes more than

once remarked with significant emphasis, she "could n't hardly set foot on the porch after supper without fallin' over a coupla husky loafers moonin' around the steps." And, furthermore, in the entire course of her extended career—the sum total of which she was at no pains to hide—she had never seen "more money throwed away on new shirts an' ties an' carved leather hatbands an' such-like fripperies" than during the past month.

"Talk about wimmin bein' the weaker sex," she usually wound up, "an' spendin' their lives dollin' up an' struttin' around like these here peacocks! My soul! The half-wit who started that scandal never seen a bunch of wuthless, forty-dollar cow-men makin' sheep's eyes at one poor, solitary girl that 's gotta listen to 'em or go to bed."

Anne was too sweet-natured and sensible to lose her head. They would have flocked around any girl placed in her position in just the same way, she told herself. She liked them all, even Grouch Davis, the cross-grained cook, who soon after her arrival got into an altercation with Lush Barton and left in a high dudgeon. She did her best to be impartial and, as a matter of fact, succeeded so well that Drummond sometimes won-

dered with a sudden qualm whether that swiftly veiled softness he had surprised once or twice in her eyes meant anything more than the pleasant friendliness she showed toward every one.

After all, what had he to offer to one whose charm and beauty made it possible for her to pick and choose wherever her fancy led her? She could not marry on a puncher's pay; at least, he would not ask her. It would mean too many years of dull, monotonous hardship before they would even gain that state of moderate prosperity which Tuttle and Jackson were now beginning to enjoy. If only he had started to save sooner! He was hoarding every penny now, but, when he looked ahead, the slow, interminable piling up of dollars—even enough to make a start with—seemed almost hopeless.

This was the hidden canker that ate into Drummond's happiness, dulling the shining splendor of those golden days, troubling, harassing, etching his smooth forehead at the most unexpected moments with anxious furrows. For the most part he kept his worries hidden. But there were times when a wave of dull despair swept over him and he felt as if he were plunged into a deep pit from which there was no possible escape.

CHAPTER XX

THE TUMBLING T'S

RIDING leisurely along the trail to Painted Post, Dirk Drummond and Pete Darrell cast appreciative glances at the sweep of lush green meadow stretching away on their left. A lazily meandering stream, lined with willows and cottonwoods, curved tortuously across its level surface. The rich luxuriance of the grass was a pleasant contrast to the sparse, burned look of the average range grazing at this time of year.

"Some nice little outfit," presently approved Darrell.

"You said it!" agreed Drummond with unexpected fervor. "Best water an' grazin' I know of in the county. Even Hidden Valley ain't up to it—quite."

"Oh, I dunno about that," objected Pete, reaching idly for the makings. "O' course there 's two streams, an' the river cuts through a bit over east. It would n't go dry in a hundred years. But Hidden Valley suits me. Pity this place ain't owned by a human bein'."

For a minute or two they rode along in silence, Darrell occupied in the meticulous fashioning of a cigarette.

"I wonder if he 'd sell," pondered Drummond at length.

Darrell straightened suddenly, cigarette dangling from his lips, match poised in one hand.

"What 's that?" he demanded.

"I wonder if old Pop would sell," repeated Drummond after a slight but noticeable hesitation.

Pete drew the match across his saddle-skirt and inhaled deeply. "Sell?" he repeated with a grin. "He shore would, if he could get his price. He 'd sell his soul, the old skinflint, only it 's that moldy an' shop-worn nobody 'd give him two bits for it. But lookit here, old tiger-eye, what's the big idea? How come yuh to be so dawggoned interested in real estate all of a sudden? You been holdin' back on us yo're first cousin to John D. Vanderbilt, or somethin'?"

Dirk grinned. "Mama! Don't I wisht I was? Can't a fellah think out loud what he 'd do if he did have a few thousand nice large round simoleons piled up in the bank?"

"Oh, shore! Thinkin' is easy—for some folks." Darrell ran his fingers through a mop of crisp, carrot-colored hair and then tilted his hat

sidewise against the sun. "Once in a while I even do some of it myself, I do. But believe me, old kid, if I had a few thousand iron men I would n't go blowin' 'em in on no lousy ranch jest pilin' up trouble an' worry for my old age. Not me! I can think up a whole herd of more interestin' things to do with it than that."

"F'rinstance?"

"Le'ssee." Darrell's eyes twinkled. "Well, first off I reckon I 'd hire me a nice li'le shack somewheres for about a month an' a guy to clean up an' cook. Pink-eye Krebs would do. Pers'nally I ain't dead in love with him, but he shore is the best hash-slinger I met up with in a month o' Sundays. Every mornin' this here Krebs would wake me up around three o'clock, an' I 'd jest reach outa my bunk—it would be a feather-bed, mind yuh, an' none o' these here corn-husk mats we gotta wear out our bones on now—an' whale a boot or somethin' at him an' then lay back and tear it off till eight or so. For breakfast I 'd have a nice, juicy tenderloin, an' hot biscuits, an'——oh, a whole raft o' good chuck us fellahs don't get sight of from one year's end to the other hardly."

Darrell's rather abrupt finish was due to no lack of invention. Once launched on a fertile

topic, he could discourse by the hour, or until silenced by a concerted assault on the part of his exasperated hearers. The reason for the sudden cessation of that verbal flood was the abrupt appearance around a bend in the trail ahead of three horsemen who loped briskly toward them. The pause was accompanied, moreover, by a slight narrowing of the puncher's gray eyes and a trifling but significant downward movement of his right hand, a movement that was virtually duplicated by his companion.

The three riders came on rapidly. Two of them were young and rather pleasant-looking. The third, close on to forty, had a thin, hatchet face with pale eyes set too close to a pinched and prominent nose. Just now it looked more pinched than usual, and in the cold, unwinking stare with which he regarded Drummond were unplumbed depths of bitter malevolence.

Dirk met his gaze steadily, a faint smile curving the corners of his firm mouth. Then his glance shifted to one of the younger men who had dropped behind.

"'Lo, Tex," he called pleasantly.

The young fellow responded, a touch of embarrassment in his faintly flushed face, and the trio passed on. Drummond did not turn his head, but

Pete, twisting in the saddle, watched the party keenly until they had passed out of sight along the curving trail. Then he straightened around with a grunt.

"Han'some cuss, Pinch Gritling," he commented. "One o' these days his bile 's gonna boil over an' choke him to death. First time yuh met up with him, ain't it, since that night yuh knocked him cold down by the Hidden Valley creek?"

Dirk nodded. "Yup. Don't look as if he 'd forgot it, does he?"

"Him forget? He ain't that kind," asserted Darrell. "He 's jest boilin' to plug yuh, an' he 'll do it, too, if he gets the chance—in the back, for preference. You shore did stir up that Bar Two bunch nice an' thorough while yuh was about it, fellah. I 'll bet Jed Hanby 's red-hot yet from bein' stood up that way an' made a fool of. I 'd watch out for 'em both."

Drummond gave a shrug. "Well, what 'd they expect? They was askin' for it, was n't they? I got my eye on Pinch, but Hanby ain't fool enough to start anythin' knowin' that if he did that paper Bill Roach gimme would get out an' bust his rep all over the State in about a million pieces."

"Mebbe," assented Pete doubtfully. Still an'

all, yuh gotta remember Jed 's slick, an' there 's more 'n one way of skinnin' a cat. If I was you I would n't go trustin' him outa reach o' my six-gun."

"Don't you worry, ol'-timer," grinned Drummond. "I ain't intendin' to. Well, s'posin' we hit her up a lick. I 'm sorta pinin' for the excitements of this here metrolopis I ain't been near for six weeks an' over."

Abandoning their easy progress, they pushed the horses to a lope and swung rapidly along the trail, a lengthening dust-cloud streaming in their wake. Their intermittent talk drifted away from old Jabez Hartshorn's ranch, which they were still skirting, but once, as he got a flashing glimpse of trim ranch-buildings topping a distant knoll, Dirk had a momentary pang of envious longing.

He put it from him quickly. More than anything on earth he wanted an outfit of his own, and the Tumbling T's seemed to meet most of his rather exacting qualifications. But he was too sensible not to realize how utterly and entirely it was beyond his reach.

"Why, yuh poor galoot!" he silently apostrophized. "You ain't got one cart-wheel, hardly, to clink against another, an' yet yuh want the earth.

No ready-made outfit for yores. Yuh be lucky if yuh can save enough in a coupla years to take up land an' start simple like Tuttle an' Stub Jackson."

And yet he sighed. At that moment two years seemed an eternity.

CHAPTER XXI

THE LETTER

ENTERING Painted Post, the two friends separated, Pete heading for the post-office on the off chance of there being any mail, while Drummond dismounted in front of Sager's Emporium to procure some hardware unobtainable in the smaller but more accessible Lewistown.

He was absent for some time from the view of the idly curious, who lounged at sparse intervals along the single wide thoroughfare. So long, indeed, that Darrell had exchanged greetings with two acquaintances and obtained diversion from a brief but very hectic dog-fight before his friend appeared, carrying a good-sized package stoutly wrapped in the section of a burlap feed-bag.

"What in time 's been keepin' yuh," inquired the red-haired youth. "Been vampin' Letty, I 'll bet a cookie."

"You lose," grinned Dirk, joining him by the hitching-rack. Letty was Ben Segar's coquettish but ponderous daughter, reputed to tip the scales

at two hundred and twenty. "She jest stepped out, thank Gawd!"

"Yo're in luck. She 's gettin' lately so 's a steam h'ist 'll hardly budge her. Le's go over to Peele's before she comes back."

Swinging into the saddle they rode down the wide street and, turning in at one side of the ramshackle frame hotel, unsaddled and left their horses in the corral.

"What d' yuh think I heard in there?" remarked Drummond, as they headed for the kitchen door. "Ben says Hanby's bought the Cross F."

Darrell's gray eyes widened. "Whooee!" he ejaculated. "The Cross F! Why, what in thunder 's the matter with Ritch Jennings? What 's he want to go an' sell out to that sucker for?"

"I expect he had to. Ben says it 's another case like the Double Circle. Hanby loaned Ritch money an' took a mortgage like he did with Sherwood. Only in this case he had to foreclose instead o' takin' possession peaceful-like, 'count o' George passin' out so convenient. Ben says Ritch is jest about wild."

"Huh! Who would n't be? I 'll bet the sucker strung him along sweet as molasses, tellin' him he would n't have to pay no money back till he was good an' ready, an' there would n't be a

chanct of his dear friend foreclosin' an' all that, and then——plumo! Lookit, though! Ain't they obliged to have a public sale?"

"Shore. They did—over in Ogden yest'day. But, right up to the day before, Ritch thought he could renew. He could n't raise the money nowhere at that short notice, an' at the sale nobody 'd raise Hanby's bid. He pulls too strong a drag with that bunch o' sharks an' suckers over at the county-seat. He got the outfit for jest the amount of the mortgage."

Darrell's thin lips curled. "The slimy toad!" he rasped. "By golly! If I was Ritch I 'd shore aim to get square with that coyote—somehow. It 's a heluva note to be dumped out by a trick like that—— Say! What 's Jed's idear, anyhow? He aimin' to gobble up the whole county?"

"I was wonderin' how long it would take that part to sink in," commented Drummond. As with one accord, they had turned away from the back door and were walking slowly around the side of the hotel. "He 's shore makin' a fine start that way, anyhow. What with his own Bar Two, an' the Double Circle, an' now Ritch's outfit, he must own pretty near a quarter of a million acres. Most of it good grazin', too, an' all in one big chunk, you might say—barrin' the Tumblin' T's

that pokes up in between the Double Circle an' the Cross F. It 's a wonder to me he has n't got after that."

"Ha!" Darrell chortled suddenly. "I shore would admire to see him try to an' nick old Pop. Believe me, he 'd get his bellyful. Any one that 's wishful to own the Tumblin' T's is gonna pay every damn cent it 's worth, an' a little bit more besides, an' he 'll lay down the cold, hard mazuma —*in* advance. That old skinflint was n't born yest'day, I 'll tell the world! Say, fellah, yuh know it 's consid'able after twelve? If we don't stir our stumps them hawgs in Peele's 'll have everythin' cleaned up an' won't leave us a scrap."

His words proved too nearly prophetic to be agreeable. Indeed, had they depended on the scanty remnants of food not already adorning the well filled plates of some dozen men hard at work at the long, oil-cloth-covered table in the hotel dining-room, they would have fared ill. Fortunately Darrell possessed a persuasive tongue and the temperament that often accompanies red hair. The combined effect on the giggling feminine hasher at length produced a fresh supply of eatables, bountiful in quantity and of so superior a quality that one guessed they had been put aside for consumption by the Peele family.

"Which same 'll likely fetch Tilly a bawlin' out," commented Pete, as they fell to with gusto. "But we should worry."

Dirk mumbled acquiescence through a mouthful of steak, and for a time conversation languished. The meal at length over, they picked up one or two more items of information regarding Jed Hanby's recent exploit, which seemed the main topic of discussion in Painted Post, and then decided to lose no further time in returning to acquaint Mrs. Foulkes with what had taken place.

"Which 'll interest her consid'able," remarked Drummond as they saddled up, "an' likewise produce remarks that 'll be refreshin'."

"Y' betcha," chuckled his companion. "She always did love Jed allesame a rattler or a mangy coyote, an' she ain't never bashful about spillin' out what 's on her mind. Le's go."

They were not disappointed. As they rode up Mrs. Foulkes was just stamping across the ranch-house veranda. She turned back at once, and as she absorbed the details of Hanby's crafty intrigue her square, rough-hewn face—the skin deeply tanned and wrinkled like a frosted apple—darkened and her keen bright eyes flashed.

"The low-down crook!" she ejaculated, slap-

ping one boot viciously with her leather quirt. "You might know he 'd be up to some sneakin', underhand business like this. Whatsa matter with Ritch Jennings, anyhow? He must be dead from the neck up puttin' any trust in that coyote. An' there 's Maria an' the two kids. What 's gonna happen to them stuck out on the door-step, yuh might say, with nothin' but their clothes an' a few sticks o' furniture? My land o' livin'! Things is come to a pretty pass when a polecat like Jed Hanby can glomm a man's ranch an'——"

At the sound of a footstep back of her the stream of verbal vitriol ceased abruptly, and she turned around. In the open doorway stood Anne Sherwood, exceedingly good to look upon in her simple gingham gown, the color of which exactly matched her eyes. Mrs. Foulkes's own angry orbs lost something of their snap, and when she spoke her voice was noticeably moderated.

"I know I 'm shouting like any cow-wrastler, m' dear," she said, an undercurrent of apology in her voice. "But when I get het up like this seems I gotta get it off 'n my chest. I would n't wonder if you 'd rare up some yoreself when yuh hear what Jed Hanby 's gone an' done."

A flush crept up under the girl's delicate golden

tan, and her lips straightened. "It 's something hateful, I 'm quite sure," she commented, crossing the veranda to the older woman's side.

"You ain't said the half of it," grated Mrs. Foulkes, her choler beginning to rise again.

At once she plunged into a scorching recount of Hanby's latest perfidy that lost nothing in the telling. In this she was ably seconded and egged on by Pete Darrell, but Drummond had little to say. Leaning against the veranda post, he was staring at Anne's clean-cut, alluring profile with its shapely lips, the perfect curve of chin and throat, the mass of corn-colored hair which waved bewitchingly over the top of a small pink ear. Dirk breathed deeply, and his heart quickened its beat a trifle. Then all at once she turned her face abruptly toward him, and at the same time he became aware of the significant attention of Mrs. Foulkes and Darrell, the latter of whom seemed to be addressing him.

"Huh?" he said dazedly. "You say somethin', Pete?"

"Oh, no; nothin' whatever," returned the red-headed one sarcastically. "Leastwise, I did n't yell at you more 'n three-four time. Now yuh come outa yore trance, I 'll try again, speakin' slow an' distinct so you 'll be shore an' get the

hang of it. I was only remarkin' that I got this here letter in town to-day an' stuck it in my shirt. What with that dog-fight an' Hanby an' all, I clean forgot about it till I felt it rustle jest now. It 's yore's, fellah; take it," he added with pitying emphasis, and thrust into Drummond's hand a sealed envelope.

Dirk took it quickly and bent a puzzled look on the face, which bore his name in a fairly neat hand, with the postmark, "Ogden." For an instant he hesitated before ripping the flap with a muscular brown forefinger.

The envelope contained a single folded sheet of paper, and as Dirk's eyes traveled slowly over the closely written lines they widened and his heavy brows came together in a frown. Reaching the signature he went back to the beginning and read the letter all over again, his expression growing more and more puzzled and perplexed.

CHAPTER XXII

THE LEGACY

IT WAS Mrs. Foulkes, frankly outspoken and evidently no longer able to restrain her curiosity, who finally broke the lengthening silence.

"I never did admire to have bad news broke to me gently," she mused aloud, impersonally addressing the surrounding atmosphere. "O' course I would n't wish to horn into anything private, but——"

She paused significantly. Dirk glanced up quickly and grinned—that infectious grin of his which so agreeably transformed a face that was likely sometimes to be a trifle too somber.

"It ain't that, ma'am, a-tall," he returned readily. "I 'd say somebody was tryin' to run a blazer on me. Let 's see what you think about it."

There was no coy dawdling or feigned reluctance in the way the lady accepted the proffered paper. She laid hold of it instantly with a roughened thumb and forefinger, and proceeded with

the utmost despatch to absorb its contents, a muttered running comment accompanying the perusal.

"From Jim Meachem, eh? Never did hold with them lawyer sharps. . . . heard from our colleagues in Chicago. . . . Um, um. Awful wordy cuss. . . late client, Jane Stebbins. . . Why n't he get on for mercy sake. . . nephew . . . sole legatee. . . My land o' love! *Twelve thousand dollars!*"

Raising her head, she stared dazedly at Drummond. "Yuh get that? Twelve thousand dollars, I read, an' you——"

"I got that the first time," nodded Dirk, as she paused speechless. His voice was level and his face composed, but a touch of unwonted color showed plainly beneath his tan. "Like I said, it strikes me somebody 's tryin' to play a cute li'le trick on me."

His significant, sidelong glance at Darrell, who stood beside him, brought that person's gaping jaws together with a snap, and opened the flood-gates before a torrent of vehement denial.

"Meanin' me, huh? I never did—nohow. Why, yuh blasted idjit, how could I? Jazz Shafer took it outa the D pigeonhole himself. Said it had been there a week or more. It 's addressed to the Bar Two, ain't it? Shore. He knowed

you 'd quit, an' was holdin' it till somebody showed up from over here. Furthermore, you pop-eyed coot, it 's postmarked Ogden, an' Gawd knows I ain't been there in——"

"Why should n't it be true?" demanded Mrs. Foulkes, ruthlessly cutting in upon Pete's tirade. "You oughta know or not whether yuh got an Aunt Jane—er—Stebbins? Have yuh?"

"Why, shore. I—I ain't seen her in seven or eight years, but she—— It jest—did n't seem——"

Drummond faltered and was silent. He could not put into words the feeling he had about this astonishing happening, that it seemed somehow too incredibly wonderful to be true. But as his glance flashed for an instant to Anne Sherwood's face, flushed and excited, he read in the depths of her amazingly blue eyes sympathy and understanding and something more—something that made his pulse leap and drove the blood, a crimson flood, to the very roots of his crisp black hair.

"D' she live in Chicago?" pursued Mrs. Foulkes briskly.

"Last I heard she did. I ain't had a letter, though, in most a year, an'——"

"Well, land o' love! Don't that prove it 's so? Who else around these parts knows yuh got a

aunt in Chicago or any other place? Besides, at worst, what 's anybody goin' to gain by runnin' a blazer like this on yuh except the fool pleasure o' seein' yuh hotfoot off to Ogden an' get stung?"

"And they would n't *see* even that unless they went with you," interjected Anne.

"Shore!" agreed Mrs. Foulkes. "Jest like I say, there would n't be nothin' in it for them a-tall. My soul! Twelve thousand dollars, an' you stand there quiet an' peaceful as if it was that many copper cents.

Dirk grinned. "I ain't peaceful inside, ma'am —none whatever. I 'm all stirred up an' jellylike. Golly! If—— But whatsa use? Time enough for fireworks when I get the straight of it from old Meachem himself."

"Mebbe so. Yuh better ride over to Ogden to-morrow, I s'pose, an' look into it." The lady fetched a sigh. "Great Godfrey! Seems like I ain't had a smitch o' luck this summer. There 's that bunch o' hosses fetchin' consid'able less 'n they oughta, an' now I gotta go an' find me a new hand, jest when I was gettin' used to you and yore ways."

"What makes yuh think I 'm gonna leave?"

" 'Cause the age o' miracles is past—some time!" returned Mrs. Foulkes dryly. "I never

yet heard tell of a cow-wrastler with a fortune stickin' to his job, an' I don't expect to in my lifetime." She smiled a wintery smile. "Don't think I 'm grudgin' yuh yore good luck, 'cause I ain't. It 's jest my way to growl an' complain when things don't jest stack up to suit me four ways. Reckon it 's time to get supper, Annie."

Without further comment she turned abruptly and stamped into the house, but Anne made no move to follow her. Instead, she took a step or two nearer Drummond.

"I 'm so awfully glad," she said, in her low, sweet voice, the former incisive intonation so curiously and fascinatingly blurred with touches of a typical Western drawl. "It 's simply splendid."

As Dirk took her proffered hand a thrill went through him and the color crept up under his tan. "Thank yuh, ma'am," he murmured. "I—I ain't bankin' on it—really, till I know for certain. You——"

He hesitated, drawing a quick breath. The eyes upraised to his were like blue, fathomless pools deep enough to drown a man. The firm grip of her smooth fingers, which he had forgotten to relinquish, seemed to send through him a little tingling shock. Darrell had left them, heading for the corral, but Dirk was not aware of it, nor did

he care. Suddenly his lips parted before a torrent of impulsive speech, but closed as swiftly, leaving the words unuttered. He must keep a guard upon his tongue—until he was quite certain.

"I—I 'm sure it will turn out all right," said Anne a little breathlessly. Quietly she withdrew her hand and took a step or two backward. "It does n't seem like the sort of thing anybody 'd—make up." She hesitated an instant, standing in the doorway. "I—I suppose Mrs. Foulkes—is right. You 'll hardly be likely to—to stay on here, after this?"

Drummond pulled himself together. "I have n't given notice yet," he told her with a grin.

When she had disappeared he turned and walked slowly toward the corral, leading his horse. Mechanically stripping off the saddle, he hung it on the fence, turned the animal loose, and sought the bunk-house.

Here he was effectually jolted out of his pleasant reverie. Pete, preceding him, had lost no time in spreading the news, and he was greeted by a torrent of joshing comment, congratulatory and otherwise, pitched in an exaggeratedly jocular key.

"Here comes the millionaire, drippin' a trail o' double eagles," shrilled Shrimp Ramsey, making

a rush for Drummond. "He 's so loaded with 'em it ain't worth his while to stop an' pick 'em up."

"C'mon, fellah," grinned Tod Shasta. "Loan me a hundred thousand. I wanna buy out Ma Foulkes, an' ain't got quite enough."

"Say, yuh ol' terrapin," chided Pebble Stone, "ain't yuh ashamed to come around here with that same ol' Stetson yuh had since the flood? Yuh 'd oughta have one o' these here pure white ones with a yard-wide brim, an' solid gold band with mebbe yore name picked out tasteful on it in diamonds, or somethin'."

"Take me to Ogden with yuh, cowboy; gwan," wheedled Chub Gifford, his smooth, deceptively babyish face dimpling distractingly. "I wanna see what yo're gonna blow yoreself to first."

"I can tell yuh that," chortled Darrell, as Dirk good-humoredly fended off the bearish assaults of the bunch. "He 's gonna glomm the Tumblin' T's off'n ol' Pop Hartshorn."

"No!" protested Lush Barton in a pained tone. "Yuh shore ain't gonna waste yore time on a poor, miserable little outfit like that? Now if yuh want somethin' worth while, there 's Jed Hanby's——"

"He don't want nothin' to do with Hanby," Darrell broke in on the Hidden Valley range-boss.

"It 's the Tumblin' T's, or nothin'. We passed along there this mornin', an' yuh oughta seen him water at the mouth." He thumped Dirk heartily on the back. "Well, ol' hellamile, there ain't nothin' now to stop yuh from makin' Pop an offer."

"Which same I may go an' do one o' these days," calmly retorted Drummond.

He clutched Darrell suddenly in the ribs, and, as Pete doubled up with a yell, Dirk's glance happened to rest on the ranch cook, who stood beside the long table a little in the rear of the chattering group. Pink-Eye Krebs, whose advent to Hidden Valley about a month before had resulted in such a welcome improvement in the bunk-house meals, was short, stout, and rather stoop-shouldered, with a round, heavy face and pale eyes, perennially inflamed and generally vacuous in expression.

There was nothing vacuous about them now. On the contrary they were singularly intelligent and alert, and were fixed on Drummond with such an eager, penetrating stare that Dirk was quite amazed. An instant later, when their glances met, Krebs dropped his lids, and in a flash his round fleshy face had taken on the old empty, brainless

expression. Turning away, he moved slouchingly toward the kitchen extension.

"Huh!" grunted Drummond, puzzled. "For a minute he did n't look stoopid a-tall. Mebbe he 's the kind that comes to life when there 's any talk about money."

CHAPTER XXIII

INTRODUCING LAWYER MEACHEM

AFTER supper Dirk strolled over to the ranch-house to make definite arrangements about going to Ogden for the purpose of consulting Lawyer Meachem. Rumors of his interest in the Tumbling T's had evidently preceded him, for Mrs. Foulkes met him with a broadside of questions, and when he admitted that he did want to acquire an outfit of his own, she emphatically commended his choice.

"Though yuh got yore work cut out for yuh makin' any reasonable dealin's with Pop Hartshorn," she commented. "A worse ol' screw never drew breath, an' he 's sharp as a b'ar-trap, too. Only one thing, he loves money—real honest-to-gosh coin—better 'n his immortal soul. If yuh was to dangle a bag o' gold in front o' him—— What yuh grinnin' at, for mercy's sake?"

"Yuh talk like I had only to ride up to Meachem's office an' pocket the hull twelve thousand," chuckled Dirk.

"Well, what 's the harm? I expect it may take

time to settle things up, but mebbe yuh can get some of it in advance like. If yo're dead set on havin' the Tumblin' T's, I 'd advise yuh to make a deal mighty sudden, an' don't go blattin' around yore intentions ontil yo're ready to cinch things, or anyway pay somethin' down an' get the refusal of the ranch. From the way Jed Hanby 's been glommin' land right an' left, I 'll bet my last cent he 's got his eye on the Tumblin' T's an' wants it bad."

"Why has n't he bought it before, then?" inquired Anne Sherwood interestedly.

"It 's my opinion he 's tried to but but would n't come up to Pop's price," returned Mrs. Foulkes promptly. "He ain't no spendthrift neither, an' so long as he was the only one in the field, it 's more 'n likely he 's countin' on doin' a bit o' jewin' down. Let him find out, though, that somebody else is after it, an' you 'll see him jump quicker 'n a rattler."

Dirk nodded, his eyes keen and bright. "I expect yo're right, ma'am," he agreed. "The fellahs were talkin' about it over in the bunkhouse, but they won't let out a peep if I tip 'em the word. O' course even if this legacy business is all straight goods, there ain't any certainty I can cash in right away, but I 'll do my best, and

if things stack up right I 'd better tackle Pop Hartshorn right off."

"Shore. Go over there from Ogden. I ain't grudgin' yuh a day or two so 's yuh get it sewed up tight. It 's wuth more 'n that to see Hanby stung. Start early an' take Pete or somebody along. Yuh might need a witness. Don't forget, either, to warn the boys to keep quiet."

Drummond obeyed her injunctions to the letter, and little more than half an hour after sunrise found him saddling up in the corral with Pete. To them appeared Pink-Eye Krebs, a sealed envelope in his hand.

"I heard yuh was goin' to Ogden," he explained, "an' thought mebbe yuh 'd take this along."

Dirk took the letter and scrutinized the scrawling, illiterate address. "What yuh want done—delivered, or put in the post-office?" he inquired.

"It—it don't matter. He's right next to Dorlan's hash-house, but if yuh ain't got time, yuh can mail it an' I 'll pay for the stamp when yuh come back. I ain't got the change with me."

Drummond thrust the envelope into his hip pocket and swung into the saddle. "I 'll deliver it," he shrugged. "We 'll be eatin' at Dorlan's, I expect. Get a move on, Pete; let 's go."

"Who 's he writin' to?" asked Darrell, when they had left the ranch-buildings behind them and were heading down the long, level, fertile valley.

"Bob Jillson. Works the wheel in Callahan's, don't he? Pink-Eye must of known him when he lived in Ogden."

It was nearly eleven when they rode into the county-seat and dismounted presently before a small frame building on the main street bearing the sign, "James Meachem, Counsellor at Law." The interior comprised a single room sparsely furnished with a few chairs, a small table behind which lounged a bored, wizen-faced boy of indeterminate age, an iron safe, and an inordinately large roll-top desk placed between two dingy fly-specked windows looking out on the rear. In one corner a staircase gave access to living apartments above.

At first sight Dirk thought the boy was the sole occupant of the office. But, as he mentioned his name, a man popped up from behind the big desk and came forward, rubbing his hands together and smiling ingratiatingly.

"Mr. Drummond, eh?" he murmured. "Well! well! I 'm glad to meet you; very glad indeed."

He was fifty-odd, thin-shanked, a trifle stoop-shouldered, and wearing a tail-coat of rusty black.

Dirk did not much fancy his sharp, foxy, rather pallid face, the oily suavity of his manner, or the moist touch of his flaccid hand. But he masked his feelings successfully and, briefly presenting Darrell, followed Meachem over to his desk, where chairs were placed and every one made comfortable.

Mr. Meachem's command of legal verbiage was wide, and it was evident from the first that he thoroughly enjoyed the sound of his own voice. Dirk guessed that he found especial pleasure in impressing two ignorant cow-men with his superior wisdom, and, while this thought annoyed him, he came quickly to the conclusion that the best policy was, as he put it mentally, to "sit tight and let him rave." He soon found that by paying close attention he was able to extract the brief, essential facts from the smoothly rippling flood of legal terminology, and this, together with an occasional glimpse of Pete's vacuous, bewildered expression, refreshed his spirits and enabled him to bear up with some degree of patience during the lengthy monologue. When at last the lawyer paused, he fetched a gusty sigh of relief and hitched up his cartridge-belt.

"I get yuh, I reckon," he commented. "Boiled down, yuh mean to say my Aunt Jane's dead

an' left me her money, which amounts to around twelve thousand dollars."

"In the neighborhood, my dear sir, in the neighborhood," murmured Mr. Meachem, rubbing his hands. "Peebles & Jennifer write me that the estate will probably net at least that sum after the—a—usual charges are deducted. It may be a little more, but scarcely, I should say, much less. I may say——"

"Shore," interrupted Drummond, foreseeing another windy outburst. "How long will it be before I get it?"

Mr. Meachem leaned back in his swivel-chair and, draping one pipe-stem leg across the other, rested the tips of his bony fingers lightly together.

"That, my dear Mr. Drummond, is a little difficult to foresee," he purred. "The law as a rule moves slowly. So many difficulties enter into the settlement of an estate that——"

"Ain't yuh able to make a guess?" cut in Dirk, again treading ruthlessly on the lawyer's flowers of speech.

"A guess? Ha! Ha!" Mr. Meachem's thin lips stretched mechanically, betraying a painful lack of dental care. "I might do that, perhaps, but quite unofficially, of course. The law allows the executors a year in which to settle legacies. I

understand, however, from Mr. Jennifer, that the late Miss Stebbins's property was all in excellent securities and that some steps have already been taken toward negotiating them. Considering the small amount involved and the fact that you are the only heir, I imagine they will be anxious to wind it up at once and wipe it off their books. Without committing myself in any way, I should say that possibly three months——"

"Three months!" repeated Drummond, his face falling. "Gosh! I thought—— That sorta puts a crimp in——"

He broke off abruptly and scowled thoughtfully at the wall back of Meachem's sparsely thatched head. Three months! Anything might happen in that time. Certainly it was difficult to believe that Hanby would delay anything like as long as that to secure the property he needed so badly to square out his recent acquirements. Dirk cursed softly under his breath and then suddenly discovered that the lawyer was regarding him intently, a world of eager speculation in his sharp eyes.

"You—a—have some special use for the—a—money now?" Meachem inquired softly as their glances met.

Dirk hesitated. "Well, s'posin' I have," he

countered. "It won't do much good wantin' if they ain't gonna settle up for three months."

"Quite so." Mr. Meachem again briefly revealed his sparsely toothed gums in what was meant to be an amiable grimace. "It occurs to me, however, that—a—something may be arranged to satisfy your—er—immediate needs."

Drummond's eyes brightened. "Huh? Oh, you mean borrow on the security of this here legacy?"

"In a way, yes. Of course not the whole of the amount, or even half, but——"

"Could I get as much as a thousand?" broke in Dirk hastily.

"That might be possible. Of course there would be——"

"Who 'd loan it to me? There ain't any banks nearer than——"

"No! No!" hastily interposed Mr. Meachem. "No banks! This sort of thing would n't appeal to them at all." Unfolding his long legs, he leaned forward across the desk. "I may say in confidence that I have a—er—little ready money awaiting investment," he explained in a lowered tone. Considering that you are my client, I 'm inclined to help you out to the extent of the thousand you need for—— You—a—did n't mention that, did you?"

Drummond's eyes narrowed slightly. "No, I didn't. How much interest would you want."

Mr. Meachem hesitated, his glance slanting sidewise toward one of the fly-blown windows. "We wouldn't call it interest, exactly," he purred. "Just a little arrangement between friends. I 'll hand you a thousand in cash in return for your promissory note for—— Well, let us say twelve hundred, payable from your legacy when received."

Darrell came to life with a jerk. "Why, you lousy skin!" he rasped. "That 's——"

He subsided suddenly under the impetus of a sharp kick on the shins from Dirk. There was a curious, brief twitching about Dirk's mouth as he glanced at Meachem, but when he spoke his voice was steady and casual.

"I 'll take yuh up," he said briefly.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MAN IN A HURRY

"YOU poor fish!" exclaimed Darrell pityingly, as the office door closed behind them about an hour later. "If yuh had any more sense you'd be a damn fool. The idea o' lettin' that dirty little petty larceny skeleton run a blazer on yuh like that. Yuh need a guardeen, yuh do, to——

"Say! What yuh hellin' about, anyhow?" interposed Drummond calmly. "Whose money is it? Tell me that."

"Yores," snorted Darrell. "But I'll tell the world it won't last long if yuh go on throwin' it around thisaway."

"Ca'm yoreself, ol' settler; ca'am yoreself," soothed Dirk, easing with his left hand the pleasing weight of fifty double eagles that sagged down his pocket. "Lookit, kid. You can't tell me a thing about that ol' Judas bird back there—not a thing. He stung me good, he did, an' there was times when I'd of given a heap to put my two fists around that scrawny neck o' his an' squeeze some good, healthy red into his pulin'

face. Alla same, I ain't kickin'. He had the coin, an' I needed it. It was worth two hundred to get it right off the bat like I did."

"Yuh might of borried it off'n somebody else for a Christian rate o' interest," grunted Pete.

"Yeah? Who, f'rinstance? There ain't a whole lot o' folks around here has got a cold thousand tucked away in their stockings. It would take time to locate 'em, an' more time to convince 'em my security was good, 'cause if I 'd a' turned Meachem down, yuh can bet he would n't of broke his neck helpin' me with anybody else. An' time, my precious little rosy sunset, is jest the one thing we have n't got. Alla same, I got a nice li'le black mark down against our slimy friend that mebbe some day I 'll wipe off. What say we mosey down to Dorlan's, kid? I could eat a horse an' chase the driver."

It was not until they were emerging from the hash-house some time later, replete and at peace with the world, that Dirk remembered the letter he had promised to deliver for Pink-Eye Krebs.

"We 'll jest hand it in next door, an' then I reckon we 'd better drag it," he remarked. "There ain't a chance in a hundred, I s'pose, of Hanby's pickin' this particular day to tackle ol' Hartshorn, but yuh never know."

The slatterny, waspish female who answered the door informed them acidly that Bob Jillson was not at home, took the letter, and slammed the door in their faces.

"I would n't be neither, if I was him," grinned Pete as they turned away. "She shore would give a guy the toothache to look at long."

Fetching their horses from the corral, they mounted and turning off the main thoroughfare, traversed one or two sparsely populated back lanes to gain presently the trail to Painted Post.

This led southward, with many twists and turns, keeping mostly to the lowlands between two mountain ranges. Without pressing their horses, the two men rode steadily until, about twelve miles outside of Ogden, the rapid thud of hoofs in the rear made them draw rein simultaneously.

"He shore is a-boilin'," commented Darrell, after a moment or two of listening.

Drummond nodded. The haste of the unknown rider was very evident and just a little unusual. Dirk's curiosity began to stir, and unconsciously he touched the heavy bag of gold in his pocket. His glance swept appraisingly to the growth of fir that lined one side of the road, returning questioningly to Darrell. Pete nodded without com-

ment, and, turning their horses, the two rode in among the trees a little way and dismounted.

"You hold 'em, while I take a squint at his ribs," said Dirk.

Thrusting the bridle into Pete's hand, he slipped back to the edge of the grove and waited. The thudding hoof-beats of the flying horse were much clearer and more distinct. Suddenly they clipped across an outcropping of rock Dirk remembered less than a hundred yards back, and an instant later the scurrying rider swept into view.

From his shelter Drummond watched the fellow speed past and followed him with his eyes until he dipped out of sight in a hollow in the trail. Then he let fall the parted fir branches and returned to Darrell.

"It 's that Dawson fellah," he announced. "Him they call Chick. Used to be barkeep in the Happy Home, didn't he? He shore is hittin' the high places. I wonder why?"

There was a momentary silence broken at length by Darrell.

"You don't reckon it can have anythin' to do with that bag o' gold that 's draggin' down yore pocket?" he questioned doubtfully. "Meachem might have put him wise, an'——"

"I wouldn't put it past the old pinchgut,"

shrugged Drummond, "but it don't look quite like that to me. Mebbe yuh noticed I did n't let Meachem know where we was headin' for. I even gave him to understand we was goin' straight back to Hidden Valley. Besides, yuh don't see a guy who 's bent on a hold-up a-boilin' along the open trail like this fellah, do yuh? Not any. Well, he 's ahead of us now, an' we 'll keep our blinkers open an' our ears peeled. Let 's get goin'. He 's too far off by now to hear us."

For the remainder of the ride they kept a sharp lookout but failed to detect any further signs of the hustling Dawson. Late in the afternoon they forded the Crocket River and pushed on briskly, skirting the edge of the Tumbling T's outfit.

As they rode on, Dirk surveyed the rich, rolling pastures with a keen, almost gloating relish. It certainly was the nicest little outfit he knew of anywhere, and one of the pleasant but surprising features of it was that old Jabez Hartshorn, despite his noted penuriousness in money matters, had always kept the ranch in excellent condition. As far as Drummond knew, the fences were good and the buildings all sound. Probably something might have to be done to the ranch-house, but in other ways——

Dirk's train of thought ended abruptly, and he

turned swiftly to Darrell with a sudden, rather sheepish laugh.

"By golly, kid!" he exclaimed. "I never thought of it till now, but it shore would be one on me if the ol' sucker refused to sell—at any price!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE FLITTING OF PINK-EYE

OLD Jabez Hartshorn sat at his desk caressing with one lean hand the goat-like appendage that protruded from beneath his chin. Drawn close to him, the skinny fingers of his other hand clutching it like the talons of a bird, was a medium-sized canvas bag that bulged alluringly. The old man's eyes, thatched by protruding, penthouse brows, were fixed on Dirk Drummond with a mingling of peevishness and devouring curiosity.

"Waal," he said fretfully, "now yuh got what yuh come for, mebbe yuh 'll lemme know where all this money 's comin' from. You ain't aimin' to rob a bank or hold up the express messenger, I expect."

Dirk carefully put away the paper he was folding and grinned. "Not this trip," he shrugged. "I don't mind easin' yore mind, ol'-timer. Not a-tall. An aunt o' mine in Chicago died an' left me her money."

A covetous gleam flashed into the old man's faded eyes.

"Huh! A legacy, hey? How much——"

"Nemmine that," interposed Drummond, accurately reading Hartshorn's train of thought. "Gawd knows you've glommed the most of it. What 's left 'll hardly keep a man in smokes for a year."

Pop pursed his lips. "Ten thousand was my price," he stated stubbornly. "I ain't put it up for you no more 'n I 'd put it down for—for anybody come around tryin' to jew me down. Why n't yuh pay the hull of it now an' save interest for three months," he went on sharply.

" Cause I ain't got it all yet; that 's why."

"Huh! How do I know you 'll have it come three months?"

"I 'm tellin' yuh; that 's all," returned Drummond curtly. "There ain't no cause for yuh to worry that I see. If I should n't come acrost on time, which ain't likely, I forfeit the deposit, don't I? An' then yuh got the ranch *an'* the thousand wheels. What more do yuh want, I ask yuh?"

The old man did not answer at once, but sat tugging at his whiskers, a doubtful, worried expression gathering strength in his wrinkled face.

"I dunno 's I like it," he complained queru-

lously at length. "It ties me up too much. S'posin' I should strike—er—gold, or somethin'——"

"Fat chance," interjected Darrell.

"Waal, it might happen; an' again somebody might come along an' offer me more 'n yuh done. I—I don't believe I 'll sell after all. I 've changed my mind. I 'd rather——"

"No yuh don't," cut in Drummond, backing hastily away from the desk. "No reniggin' now. The deal 's gone through. Papers signed an' witnessed proper by Pete an' yore own man, an' yuh got the de-posit cuddled up there in yore hand. There ain't no cause to get all fretted, Pop," he went on soothingly from the doorway. "Gawd knows yuh got a good price for yore outfit, an' now yuh can settle down comfortable in town an' take things easy. C'mon, Pete, it 's time we pulled our freight."

Without waiting for further argument from old Hartshorn, the two hastily left the ranch-house and, mounting, rode rapidly toward the trail. A matter of two hundred yards or so from the house the track rose abruptly over a hillock to drop as swiftly into a shallow sandy gully beyond. Talking briskly as they loped up the rise, Dirk and his companion were oblivious to the faint

sounds of a horse approaching from the other direction. And so, quite without warning, they found themselves at the summit face to face with Jed Hanby astride a laboring and sweated bay.

The surprise was evidently mutual. Hanby pulled up abruptly and for an instant glowered at them from under his beetling brows. Then, as if the explanation of their presence here had burst on him like a lightning shock, his square grizzled face purpled suddenly, and into his eyes there flashed a look of simply murderous fury. His right hand——

"Don't try it, Jed," warned Drummond evenly, his six-shooter trained steadily on the other's body. "Jest keep yore hands in sight. A mite higher. That 's right. Gonna make a li'le visit to ol' Pop? Don't lemme detain yuh. You 'll find him right in his office."

"Curse yuh!" frothed Hanby furiously. "Yo're always buttin' in on my business, yuh damn swab! Mebbe yuh think yuh can double-cross me again like yuh did an' get away with it, but——"

"Nemmine the rest of it," cut in Dirk curtly. "Best thing yuh can do is to fan it, pronto. There 's the trail, and right yonder 's Pop's ranch-house. We 'll wait here till you 've gone inside."

With a furious, inarticulate curse, Hanby

jabbed spurs into his horse and whirled past the two Hidden Valley men. Turning their mounts, the latter watched him tear down the slope and across the open to pull up amid a cloud of dust before the ranch-house door. Not until he had disappeared inside did they exchange speech.

"Some close figgerin'," observed Pete as they headed into the gully. "If he 'd come half an hour sooner he 'd likely have gummed up things consid'able."

"Y' betcha. What beats me, though, is how he come to be on the ground so pat. I had a hunch back in town we had n't oughta waste any time, but I shore did n't expect to cut it as close as this. I wonder——"

Drummond broke off, his face thoughtful. Pete regarded him curiously.

"You ain't figgerin' he was tipped off, are yuh?" he asked. "That don't seem noways possible, considerin' there ain't a soul off'n the Hidden Valley outfit that knows anything about yore wantin' the Tumblin' T's."

Dirk did not answer at once. He seemed to be turning over something in his mind. It was not until they had left the Tumbling T's and were well started on the homeward trail that he glanced sidewise at Darrell.

"It's that Chick Dawson I'm wonderin' about," he commented. "When he passed us he was n't just out on a pleasure jaunt. He had somethin' important on his mind. If he took that cross trail eight miles back he'd of struck the Bar Two about the time we rode up to ol' Pop's door."

"But how the devil would Chick Dawson know anything about where we were goin'? We did n't even see him in town."

"No, but he 's a pal o' Jillson's ain't he?" said Drummond significantly. "An' we left a letter at Jillson's house——"

Light penetrated suddenly on Darrell. "Pink-Eye, by golly!" he exclaimed. "The lousy pup! But what in thunder 's he got to do with Hanby? I never heard they was——"

"There 's a whole herd o' things yuh don't hear about Jed till they 're dragged out by accident," Dirk commented grimly. "He 's one slippery cuss, he is. Only by luck I got that stuff from Bill Roach about the way he got his start years ago rustlin' wholesale, an y' betcha there 's a whole lot more bright spots in his young life he's kept under his hat."

"I would n't wonder. It's a good thing yuh got Roach's signed statement tucked away in Ma

Foulkes' safe. Saves yuh a lot o' watchin' out when Jed 's around. He 'd give the world to crawl yore hump, only if he did he knows that would go into the sheriff's hands di-rect."

"Uhuh. Alla same, I ain't trustin' too much to it, kid," remarked Dirk. "There 's a lot o' ways Jed could run his iron on me without doin' it himself. An' again, I would n't wonder if his bile boiled over one o' these days an' he got reckless o' consequences. About Pink-Eye"; his lips straightened grimly. "I reckon it 's up to us to put him through a li'le cross-examination, as our friend, Slippery Meachem would say, when we get home. I 'm kinda curious to see what he 'll have to say."

It happened, however, that his curiosity was doomed to remain ungratified. Dusk was falling rapidly, and, considering the distance to Hidden Valley and the condition of the horses, who had had a hard day of it, it was decided not to push on that night. About ten miles from the Tumbling T's the two friends halted beside a little brook backed up by a heavy growth of spruce, stripped the horses, and, hobbling them, made themselves comfortable under the trees. Some sandwiches had been provided in Ogden against such an emergency, and after a cigarette or two

they stretched out on the thick carpet of pine-needles and fell asleep almost at once.

Up with the dawn, they made such good progress that they reached Hidden Valley before seven. Dirk was somewhat surprised to meet none of the men on their way in, and even more so to find them still gathered around the table in the bunk-house.

"Whatsa matter, Lush?" he drawled from the doorway. " 'Larm-clock on the bum?"

The usually amiable foreman scowled at him from his place at one end of the table. "Not only on the bum, but gone," he snapped curtly.

Dirk's gaze swept inquiringly from one ill-tempered face to another. Moving a step or two forward, he observed over Frenchy Lamotte's shoulder a piece of tough and withered-looking steak, a rejected bit of sourdough, the interior unappetizingly raw, a cup of muddy coffee. Suddenly his glance sought the open door of the kitchen.

"Where 's Pink-Eye?" he asked abruptly.

"Gone, like I told yuh," retorted Lush Barton crossly. "Skipped—vamoosed—went an' took French leave."

Drummond's eyes narrowed slightly. "What 's the idea?" he demanded. "When 'd he go?"

"Gawd knows," snapped Barton, pushing his chair back noisily. "This stuff ain't fit to feed hawgs," he growled, glaring at Pebble Stone. "Ain't yuh an' Tod never cooked anything in yore lives before?"

Both the accused retorted bitterly, and a heated wrangle promptly ensued French Lamotte looked up at Drummond with a grin.

"Zee Pink-Eye she fleet in zee night," he explained, his black eyes twinkling. "Bedtime, she here; come get-up—late—she gone wiz horse an' saddle."

"Did n't leave no word or nothing?"

"Nozzing," returned Frenchy, with an eloquent gesture of his brown, shapely hands. "She jes'—go."

Drummond and Darrell exchanged glances. "Well, there's one good cook gone, but otherwise small loss," commented the former. "Ain't there any chuck around, Lush, that 's not half raw or burned to death? Pete an' me are starvin'."

"You can take what we had, or rustle for yoreselves," retorted the exasperated foreman. "Get a move on, fellahs. We ain't only about two hours late now."

When the bunch had departed grumbling,

Dirk and Pete sought the kitchen and managed to put together a fairly decent meal, after which Darrell went out to saddle up while Drummond sought the ranch-house. He found the two women in the kitchen, and, in response to Mrs. Foulkes's eager demand for details, he briefly outlined the results of their trip. The lady's comments on Lawyer Meachem were scarcely fit to print, but when Dirk told of having obtained the option and about the meeting with Jed Hanby she chortled delightedly. Anne made no comment, but her face was eloquent enough.

"Beat him by a hair!" exclaimed Mrs. Foulkes. "I 'll bet he was ready to do murder. Le's see that option."

Drummond handed her the paper, which she read over slowly and carefully. "Looks good to me," she commented. "I 'd say you 've got the old skinflint tied up so hard an' fast he can't wriggle loose nohow. Though Lord knows ten thousand 's a great plenty for his outfit. Better go in the safe, had n't it?"

"Shore," nodded Dirk. "No use takin' chances, though I reckon there ain't anybody on the ranch *now* I would n't trust."

"Huh!" snorted Mrs. Foulkes, leading the way toward the living-room. "Yuh mean that Krebs?

Ain't it exasperatin'? Never a word o' warnin outa him—not even a kick or a touch for more money. Jest gone, for no reason a-tall that I see an' not been here a month hardly. I allus thought he was a half-wit." She paused in front of the old-fashioned iron safe standing against the wall of the living-room. "Now I gotta rustle around an' hire me a new cook quick, or else have murder done in the bunk-house," she went on in an annoyed tone. "I wisht I'd known before yuh left yesterday what was millin' around in his fool head. It would of saved me a trip to——"

She broke off abruptly with an odd sucking of the breath and for an instant stood motionless, one hand outstretched toward the combination knob of the safe. Then suddenly, catching hold of the handle, she gave a yank, and the steel door swung open.

"Well!" she ejaculated, a world of meaning in her voice. Turning her head, she stared from Dirk to Anne Sherwood and back to the safe again. "*Well!*" she said again.

"You—you did n't leave it open, didja?" asked Drummond, a troubled suspicion coming over him.

"Leave it open?" repeated Mrs. Foulkes with a snort. "I shore did n't. Whatcha think I am? a dumb fool? Somebody's been at it, that 's

what 's happened, an' I got a pretty good notion who it was."

Ignoring the account-books and some bundles of papers lying on the open shelves, Mrs. Foulkes jerked open a small drawer, peered into it, and straightened with an exclamation of fury.

"The low-down, ornery varmint!" she rasped. "Over two hundred dollars, an' he 's got away with every cent. What 's more——"

She paused to run her fingers along the bottom of the empty drawer. Dirk drew his breath softly.

"That paper o' Bill Roach's about Hanby?" he murmured questioningly.

"That 's gone, too," she told him angrily. "It lay right there underneath the money."

CHAPTER XXVI

CHECK!

"MY land o' love!" snapped Mrs. Foulkes in an irritated tone, as Dirk suddenly threw back his head and laughed. "What in the name of all that 's sensible yuh brayin' thataway for?"

"Beg yore pardon, ma'am," apologized Drummond swiftly. "I 'm mighty sorry about them two hundred bones yuh lost; I shore am. It jest struck me all of a sudden as sorta funny the neat way that fellah fooled the lot of us. Why, up to yeste'day I allus took him for a sorta half-wit."

"Yeste'day? What happened yeste'day to make yuh change yore mind?"

As Dirk told her about the letter Krebs had sent to Jillson and his suspicions regarding it, Mrs. Foulkes's weather-beaten face turned a dark and angry red.

"So Jed 's at the bottom of it, huh?" she rasped. "The miserable snake in the grass, plantin' that dirty crook on me a-purpose to

glomm that paper, an' anything else he could lay his thievin' hands on. If I don't get square with—— Where yuh goin'?"

"Over to the bunk-house for a minute," explained Dirk, who had started for the door. "I wanna see if he 's got away with that bill o' sale for the sorrel, too. That 's a heap more important than this here paper o' Roach's. I can get him to make out another any time by ridin' over to the Lazy Y, but if that bill o' sale 's gone Hanby 'll like as not rake up that charge against me o' rustlin' the hoss."

"I 'd like to see him try," exclaimed Mrs. Foulkes hotly. "Why me, or Anne here, or Lush could any one of us go to co't an' swear our Bible oath we 'd seen it. He would n't dare."

"Mebbe not," shrugged Dirk, "Allesame, I 'll jest make shore."

He sped over to the bunk-house and, digging under his bunk, dragged out a battered duffle-bag. Tossing this to one side, he lay flat on his stomach and by dint of considerable straining managed to wriggle head and shoulders part way under the low planking. Almost at once his exploring fingers touched a thin piece of board about twelve inches long laid squarely against the roughly planed surface of the bottom log. It was held

there by a single nail, and a little tug brought it away. When Dirk crawfished backward and sat up, he held in his hand a folded paper and two twenty-dollar bills.

"Fooled yuh, that time, yuh dawg-goned coyote," he chuckled. "Y ain't so smart, after all."

Unfolding the paper to make sure that it was the one he sought, he loosened the draw-string of the duffle-bag. It was at once evident that the contents had been thoroughly tossed about, but the discovery, while slightly irritating Drummond and causing him to repeat his silent vow to cause Krebs, in case he ever met up with him, some poignant and vehement regrets, did not surprise him.

"Wisht I 'd put the other one here, too," he muttered, as he bent to replace the paper and the board that hid it so completely. "Still what 's done is done."

It was the merest chance that had caused him weeks before to make this disposition of the bill of sale. At the time, indeed, he had been aware of a slight qualm as if his action in a way cast reflection on the honesty of his fellows.

"Dawg-goned lucky I did, after all," he grunted, restoring the nail with the flat side of a

pair of pliers. "I wonder how the devil that skunk opened the safe."

Returning to the ranch-house, he found Mrs. Foulkes and Anne discussing that same question.

"The lock wa'n't forced, an' there ain't even a scratch on the door," commented Mrs. Foulkes. "O' course it 's an old-fashioned thing, an' I reckon one o' these here safe-crackers yuh hear about might juggle open the combination, but Pink-Eye Krebs——"

She paused eloquently. Drummond shrugged his shoulders.

"No tellin' but what he is an expert," he commented. "He 's shore slick enough in other ways, an' Hanby 's jest the sort to take a lot o' trouble when he wants somethin'."

"I 'll say so," agreed Mrs. Foulkes irritably. "Yuh better go straight over to the Lazy Y an' see Bill Roach about it," she added in a different tone. "I been thinkin' about that an' worryin' consid'able. Jed ain't the kind to leave a thing half done, an' I won't be right comfortable until yuh got another paper like the one was stole."

The same thought had been in Drummond's mind, and he lost no time in saddling up and setting forth. It was a good fifty-mile ride, but by dint of steady going Dirk reached the Lazy Y

late in the afternoon. When he swung stiffly out of the saddle before the ranch-house door, however, his mount was all in, and he had a notion that another ten miles would have been almost impossible.

There happened at the moment to be no one in sight, but, as he limped over to the open door of the office, Drummond discovered the foreman, Jim Ferguson, sitting at his desk engaged in earnest conversation with a man whose back was toward the door.

" 'Lo, Dirk," the foreman greeted him briefly. "Come on in."

"I won't bother yuh jest now, Fergie," returned Dirk, leaning against the door-casing. "I jest dropped in to have a word with Bill Roach. He over in the bunk-house?"

The other man turned swiftly, revealing the familiar features of Rupe Billings, the county sheriff. The look he bent on Drummond was keenly inquiring and not over-friendly. Ferguson's gray eyes narrowed slightly, and for an instant he hesitated.

"Yo're a mite late, ol' settler," he drawled presently. "Roach was shot over on the east range this mornin'. The boys brought him in jest before dinner."

Dirk's lips straightened, and his heavy eyebrows came together in a scowl.

"Shot!" he repeated. "What the devil—— Who—— Yuh mean he 's—cashed!"

Ferguson nodded. "Drilled through the forehead with a Winchester forty-five. He never knew what hit him."

CHAPTER XXVII

DIRK SCORES

THE killing of Bill Roach became something of a three days' excitement throughout the neighboring country-side, but, like many such events, the interest soon began to subside from lack of fuel to feed the flame.

The murdered man had few friends save among his immediate associates on the ranch, and these, though zealous enough in trying to discover evidence of the identity of the killer, were unsuccessful. No one had witnessed the shooting, but from the position of Roach's body it was evident that the murderer must have hidden in a little draw grown up in spruce about two hundred yards from where he lay. Indeed, very little searching on the part of the bunch of Lazy Y cow-men was needed to find the exact spot where the man had stood. The repeated marks of hoofs under one of the trees, a dozen scattered cigarette-butts, a few faint prints of boots, all combined to tell their story of a long, persistent wait. But neither hoof-

prints nor footprints had anything more distinctive about them than the empty rifle-shell some one unearthed among the pine-needles.

Drummond was with the party. Under the first shock of the news, his impulse had been instantly and furiously to accuse Jed Hanby of being at least party to the crime. He did not believe the ranchman had actually done the shooting, but there was n't a doubt in his mind that Hanby had procured the killing for the purpose of shutting Roach's mouth.

There in Ferguson's office he was on the verge of proclaiming that belief and backing it up with facts. But as his eyes raked the square, bulldog face of Sheriff Billings, he remembered that the fellow was one of Hanby's closest intimates, and for the moment he held his peace. Afterward when he had a chance to talk the whole thing over with Ferguson, who he knew could be trusted, the latter confirmed his judgment.

"Yuh can't get nothin' on him thataway," he said emphatically. "Billings an' Judge Driscoe an' Hanby are thick as bugs in a rug, an' between 'em they pretty near run Fremont County. They 're crooked as sin, but they 're slick enough to seem to stick within the law, even if they don't really. That 's how they 're able to shove through

so many dirty deals—that, an' the pull they 've worked up with that gang o' roughnecks in Ogden. You 'd only be gettin' in Dutch an' not doin' a mite o' good."

"I 'm in Dutch with Hanby all I can be now, if it comes to that," retorted Drummond grimly.

"Mebbe so, but if yuh go rarin' around an' accusin' him o' puttin' Roach outa the way, or hirin' some gunman to do the trick, yo're only spillin' out what 's on yore mind to no purpose. He 's got a cast-iron alibi, y' betcha. No, fellah; yuh better keep quiet until yuh can get somethin' on him good—so good that the stink of it 'll reach 'way over the heads of Driscoe an' the sheriff. That 's the only way to get the drop on Jed Hanby. I wish I could help yuh about that paper, but all I did was to witness Bill's signature. I had no idea a-tall what was in it.

Drummond was forced reluctantly to admit the wisdom of his advice, and, though it went decidedly against the grain, he held his peace. After an early breakfast in the bunk-house he accompanied the Lazy Y punchers to search the neighborhood of the shooting and, this over, he set out for home without returning to the ranch-house.

The news he brought enraged Mrs. Foulkes beyond expression. It's effect on Anne Sherwood was to blanch her face and bring a troubled, frightened look into her blue eyes.

"Oh!" she cried impulsively. "You—— Suppose he——" She swallowed hard. "Don't you see?" she went on anxiously. "With that paper stolen you 've no hold on him now at all. The next thing he 'll try to——"

"Anne's right," put in Mrs. Foulkes, suddenly serious. "The lid 's off, yuh might say, an' knowin' Jed Hanby, yuh want to be mighty careful from now on."

Dirk laughed. "Don't yuh go worryin' none," he told the two women, though his gaze, it must be confessed, rested almost entirely on the face of one. "I 've already got my eyes peeled for trouble. If Hanby expects to run a whizzer on me, he 's gotta be a whole lot smarter than I think."

"Don't yuh make no mistake in believin' he ain't got brains," cautioned Mrs. Foulkes. "If he was a dumb-bell there would n't be nothin' to fret about. From now on yuh watch out, I 'm tellin' yuh."

Within the week came the first of a series of

significant happenings that amply bore out her words, and also Drummond's firm, though unexpressed, conviction that the ranchman would leave no stone unturned to "get" him.

Late one afternoon, on a day when Dirk was detained around the ranch-buildings, Tod Shasta, who was of much his build and general coloring, and who happened to be riding a sorrel with white trimmings that was a dead spit of Drummond's pet mount, was shot through the shoulder while returning with some of the other men from the southern end of the valley. The shot came from well up on the cliffs near which the party was riding, and while two of them attended to the wounded man the others flung themselves from their horses and made a dash for the spot from which the puff of smoke had eddied.

It was a slow, hard climb, and by the time they reached the wooded ledge their unknown quarry had long since made good his escape. But here, as in that little draw over on the Lazy Y, they found the repeated hoof-prints of a stamping horse, the same scattered circle of cigarette-butts, a faint mark or two from a No. 8 boot. Frenchy Lamotte, a clever trailer, followed the horse's track along the ledge and up through a crooked gulch to the

edge of that vast mountain wilderness lying to the east of Hidden Valley beyond which it was fruitless to continue the pursuit.

"It could n't have been Hanby or even Pinch Gritling," commented Dirk, as they talked it over that evening. "They both got feet like canal-boats. An' from what I know of the Bar Two fellahs, I 'd say he 'd have a job gettin' any of them to do his dirty work."

"He 's hired a gunman, I expect," growled Lush Barton. "That 's what he would do, the lousy pup!"

Dirk's lips straightened grimly. It was his own notion, but he made no comment save a brief nod of agreement. He was rapidly reaching a degree of inner heat when a chance encounter with the plotting ranchman was likely to result in instant, violent action regardless of consequences.

Perhaps Hanby considered such a possibility likely and purposely avoided it. Though, indeed, Shasta's absence from the range threw so much extra work on the other men that for a week or so Dirk did not leave Hidden Valley. While riding the range he kept a sharp lookout and stuck mostly to the wide, open spaces, but there was no further attempt at bushwhacking. Finally,

about a month after the shooting of Bill Roach, he decided that it was high time to interview Lawyer Meachem and find out what progress had been made toward settling the Stebbins estate.

In response to Mrs. Foulkes's curt admonitions and even more to Anne's urgence, he left the valley early one morning by the upper and more unfrequented path, and, taking a somewhat roundabout route, reached Ogden about noon quite without misadventure. He was greeted by Meachem with the lawyer's usual oily suavity and the assurance that matters were progressing excellently. There seemed no reason to doubt, he said, that the money would be in hand well within the promised three months, and added that he would send word to Drummond the moment he had anything definite to communicate.

Leaving the office, Dirk nodded curtly to Bob Jillson, just emerging from the house next to Dorlan's restaurant, and stepped into the restaurant for dinner. Though it seemed scarcely likely that even Hanby's henchmen would dare pull off any dirty work here, Drummond took a seat with his back to the wall and facing the open door.

Nothing untoward happened during the meal or afterward while he made several purchases for Mrs. Foulkes. But as he rode out of the narrow

lane leading back to Dorlan's corral, he met the languid but curiously intent regard of a friend of his, Tim Cronshay, who clerked in the hardware store, lounging against the front of the building.

"Saw yuh trailin' in there jest now," drawled Cronshay, when they had exchanged greetings. "Goin' home?"

"Shore. I gotta start soon to hit the valley before dark."

"Uh-huh," grunted Cronshay indifferently. He spat accurately and with volume into the roadway, and then from one corner of his mouth came a curt, brief whisper. "Take the Lewistown trail; it 's—healthier."

"Got yuh," breathed Dirk promptly. "Well, I better be wrigglin' along," he added aloud, picking up his reins. "Ain't yuh workin' to-day?"

"Nope. Got the afternoon off. Waal, s'long."

Drummond left him and rode slowly along the main street, his manner unhurried and composed. So Jillson was mixed up in it, was he? Not as the principal assassin, though, Dirk felt sure. He did not have the quality of nerve requisite for that sort of thing. More likely his part was to act as go-between for Hanby and the gunman,

to play the part of spy around Ogden and the neighborhood, and, as undoubtedly in this instance, to act on his own initiative in case Drummond showed up at the county-seat.

"You'll play yore little tricks once too often, fellah," apostrophized Dirk, easing his sixgun in the holster. "One o' these days yo're goin' to make a slip."

The wide street merged imperceptibly into a well-traveled trail leading out of Ogden to the westward. For about three quarters of a mile it traversed the fairly level open country lying on this side of town before dividing into two branches. One of these curved southward down an easy grade, to disappear a scant half-mile beyond in a heavy growth of timber which clothed the valley and swept raggedly up the mountain slope that formed its western margin. The other branch led directly westward, rising straight over a rocky shoulder and curving on through the mountains toward Lewistown, which lay on the further side of Hidden Valley.

As Drummond pushed his horse up the first steep ascent, his glance rested curiously on the forest-covered valley. As a spot for an ambush it could scarcely be surpassed, and for a moment he was strongly tempted to turn the tables on

his enemies and see what might be done by a stealthy, circuitous approach on the man or men he felt sure were waiting for him somewhere in that green fastness.

With some reluctance, however, he dismissed the thought as impracticable, and pushed on over the shoulder of the mountain, and up along a bare ridge where for a space of a hundred yards or so his tall figure was boldly silhouetted against the brilliant sky.

His gaze was still fixed on the valley half a mile or so below when suddenly his quick eye caught a sense of movement along the edge of the trees. It was pure instinct that made him jab spurs into his horse, instinct and that species of sixth sense that is really little more than the combination of keenest sight and long experience of hazardous conditions. As the horse leaped forward behind an upthrust mass of rock, a puff of smoke eddied from the wood, Dirk heard the whine of a bullet back of him, and an instant later the faint report of a rifle reached his ears.

Sliding out of his saddle, Drummond pulled the Winchester from its scabbard, dropped to the ground, and crept cautiously to the edge of the boulder. This terminated in a rough pile of loose stones that had evidently been thrown there

to clear the trail. Sprawling at full length, Dirk found a tiny crevice through which he managed to thrust the rifle-barrel, and, training the sights on the spot whence the smoke had come, he waited.

The great boulder cast a shadow over the heap of stones, so that there was no betraying glitter on the slightly protruding rifle-barrel. Dirk had a notion that his enemy was awaiting his reappearance beyond the rocky barricade, and so it proved. Squinting along the sights he presently made out, just inside the fringe of trees, not one figure, but two. Both of them held rifles to their shoulders, and with a sudden fierce thrill Dirk swiftly got his range and pulled the trigger.

When the smoke had cleared away, both figures seemed to have disappeared. An instant later, however, Drummond realized that one of them was bending over, dragging at the prostrate body of the second. He hesitated, undecided whether to shoot again. But before he could make up his mind the two had vanished.

Dirk mounted quickly and urged the horse over a rise and down into the protected hollow beyond.

"About time those fellahs had a lesson," he observed with satisfaction to the paint-horse. "Things was gettin' too dawg-goned monotonous an' one-sided for any use."

CHAPTER XXVIII

POISONED DARTS

WHETHER or not the check administered by Drummond to the Hanby forces had anything to do with it, the fact remained that for some time there was a cessation of hostilities. It was during this period that Mrs. Foulkes, riding to Painted Post on various errands, decided that Anne ought to accompany her.

"You ain't been off the ranch in two months an' more, m' dear," she told the girl bruskly. "Folks 'll be sayin' I 'm keepin' yuh here by force to do the chores an' slavery work.'

"As if I cared what they said," retorted Anne, with a smile, which showed her fondness for the curt, sharp-spoken, but soft-hearted proprietress of the ranch. "I 'd like the ride, of course, and I do need a few things from the store. But who 'd look after Tod if we both went?"

Mrs. Foulkes sniffed. "Cookee 'll keep an eye on him all that 's necessary. He 's been

cranky as a bobcat with a sore ear the last few days, which shows he 's on the mend. Go get yore things on, an' I 'll saddle up."

Anne obeyed without any further protest, but for all that the prospect of a trip to town did not thrill her inordinately. Since her coming to Hidden Valley she had left the ranch only once when, in company with Mrs. Foulkes, she went to get her personal belongings from the Double Circle ranch-house. Nevertheless, the time had not hung heavily on her hands. More than once, indeed, she had wondered a little how she, whose life had been spent in the busy social doings of an Eastern suburban town, could find so much of pleasure and contentment in the restricted, almost humdrum activities of the ranch. But so it was, and, somehow, Anne did not care to probe her feelings too deeply.

The two women set out briskly and rode into Painted Post about eleven o'clock. Anne had been uncommonly interested in a passing survey of the Tumbling T's land, and was still thinking about it when they dismounted in front of Segar's Emporium.

"I 'll step into Simmons's an' see about them bolts an' nuts we need," remarked Mrs. Foulkes. "Yuh better get Letty started showin' yuh that

ribbon. She 's slower 'n molasses in January. I won't be more 'n ten or fifteen minutes."

She stalked down the street toward the blacksmith-shop with her firm, masculine stride, and Anne turned to enter the general store. A woman was just coming out, and at the sight of Anne her wrinkled, sharp-visaged face lit up with a keen and vixenish sort of pleasure.

"Waal—Annie!" she exclaimed. "I ain't laid eyes on yuh since yuh tuck an' run away from the ranch two months an' more ago. I hear yo're livin' over to Hidden Valley."

"I 'm staying with Mrs. Foulkes; yes," returned Anne, repressing with some difficulty her dislike for the late George Sherwood's middle-aged and sharp-tongued housekeeper.

"Huh!" sniffed Mrs. Pritchard. "Must work yuh pretty hard if yuh ain't able to get to town in all this time; at least I ain't heard yuh been here."

"She does n't work' me, as you call it, at all," retorted Anne coldly. "That 's the trouble. I 've a hard time getting her to let me do anything. I have n't been to town because there did n't happen to be anything to bring me here."

"I dunno how yuh make out to pass the time, then," commented the older woman. She paused

a moment, lips pursed and sharp eyes regarding the girl keenly. "Speakin' frank, like I allus do—'Say the truth an' shame the devil' is my motter——" she went on presently, "yuh made a big mistake, Annie, when yuh throwed down Jed Hanby. There 's a man that 's up an' comin'. Why, if yuh 'd took him yuh 'd been able to live like a lady without ever liftin' a finger instead o' bein' an object o' charity, so to speak, without a penny to——"

"That 'll do, Mrs. Pritchard," interrupted Anne, her eyes flashing indignation. "You ought to know my opinion of Mr. Hanby. What 's more, I don't in the least care about discussing my private affairs in the public street, or anywhere else for that matter—with you."

She made a movement to pass into the store, but the woman blocked her way.

"Oh, *is* that so?" Mrs. Pritchard inquired snappishly. "Great airs we 're givin' ourselves, we are." Her small, pale eyes fairly shot venom. "I hear that Drummond fellah 's workin' over to Hidden Valley," she flung out significantly.

A flush, which Anne would have given the world to suppress, flamed into her face. "I fail to see what that 's got to do with my being there," she countered, her shapely chin squaring.

Mrs. Pritchard laughed spitefully "Oh, no! O' course not! Nothin' to do with it a-tall—naturally. Lemme tell yuh, my fine miss, what folks are sayin' about yuh an' him, that when yuh run off from the Double Circle yuh fair threw yoreself at his head, an' he had to pay some attention to yuh to hold his job with Ma Foulkes. Why, yuh little ninny! He 's got a fine, upstandin' girl over beyond Lewistown. Do yuh s'pose for a minute he 'd look at yuh serious? I won't say mebbe he ain't a mite sorry for yuh, havin' no money an' no place to go, yuh might say, except to sponge on strangers. But as for anythin' else——"

"How dare you!" cut in Anne, her voice shaking with anger. "Let me by!"

Reaching out one slender, muscular arm, she caught Mrs. Pritchard with a force which made the woman wince, and, whirling her from the doorway, pushed past her into the store.

Her face was flaming, and she was grateful to find both Segar and his stout daughter occupied with customers.

"Insolent!" she murmured passionately, as she made pretense of examining some bolts of calico lying on the counter near the door. "How dared she—the creature!"

She recovered her composure presently and walked down the store to select the ribbon and other small things she wanted. But when Mrs. Foulkes joined her Anne found it difficult to respond to the older woman's brusque, dry comments and occasional witticisms with any show of naturalness.

The mood continued during the noonday meal and all through the ride back to Hidden Valley. Anne did her best to keep her mind from wandering and to render her usual gay response to Mrs. Foulkes's remarks. But the elder woman was not deceived, and when they reached the ranch-house she hustled the girl off to her room to take a nap.

"Yo're tired out; that 's what 's the matter," she told her gruffly. "What yuh need is to lay down till supper time. Go along with yuh now, an' don't begin to arguify."

But Anne was n't in the least tired, physically. She was hurt and sore and filled with indignation and outraged pride. And as she lay there on her bed, wide-eyed and restless, fragments of Mrs. Pritchard's venomous speech returned to torment her.

She was perfectly well aware that the woman had spoken out of a malicious desire to wound and

humiliate her. But as she thought it over she realized with a sinking heart that something at least of what the creature said was true. She *was* indeed penniless and living on the bounty of a stranger, though it had never occurred to her to consider the situation in that light before. She was fond of Mrs. Foulkes and felt quite certain that the widow reciprocated the feeling and really enjoyed having her about.

"All the same," she murmured, "I *am* living on—charity."

The thought made her wince, but somehow that was not the worst. Those other comments of Mrs. Pritchard stabbed her with a far keener and more bitter pain. She tried to thrust them from her mind, but they persisted in returning to hurt her desperately.

Not for an instant did she credit the statement that Drummond had been forced to pay her attention in order to "hold his job"! He was n't that kind, she knew. The other sting was different. It did n't seem possible that his actions could have been governed solely by pity. And yet, knowing the fine sincerity, the single-minded, chivalrous attitude of some of these Western men toward women, she realized with fatal accuracy that one of Drummond's type might well

be led away by mere compassion for a helpless girl placed in such a pass as Anne. But—pity! That, somehow, was the most poignant thrust of all.

Suddenly Anne's slim, shapely body twisted sidewise, and her blond head fell forward upon her upthrust hands. Through blurring tears she had a vision of the handsome, kindly man who all his life had been more chum than father. To him Anne had taken her troubles, great and small, and always she had been comforted. But he was gone; and at the realization that there was nobody in all the world to take his place the girl felt suddenly as if her heart would break.

"Oh—dad!" she whispered chokingly. "I—want you so; I need you. There 's no one—no one else at all."

CHAPTER XXIX

SUSPICION

ALMOST at once Dirk Drummond became aware of a marked change in Anne's demeanor which troubled and perplexed him. Overnight, apparently, she had grown reserved, aloof, avoiding with only too evident premeditation anything in the nature of a tête-à-tête between them. He racked his brain trying to think of some way in which he might have unintentionally offended, but so far as he could see his slate was clean. And, because his conscience was so clear, his pride rose up making it impossible to ask her frankly what had come between them.

It is quite possible that a little time might have served to wear away his obstinacy and bring about some sort of explanation, but time was the one thing Drummond lacked. Almost imperceptibly, it seemed, the days and weeks had slipped away until suddenly he awoke to the realization that barely a fortnight remained of his hard-won option on old Pop Hartshorn's outfit.

And still no further word had come from Lawyer Meachem.

"It's my opinion the old rat 's holdin' back on yuh," declared Mrs. Foulkes, as they discusssed the matter seriously one evening. "I never did put no trust in lawyers. We all know what a rascal that Judge Driscoe is, an' like as not this fellah 's jest as bad."

Dirk nodded. "I would n't wonder if you were right," he agreed. "I expect I 'd better have another talk with him. If you can spare me I reckon I 'll ride over to Ogden to-morrow."

"I can spare yuh, all right, only be shore an' keep yore eyes peeled. Don't go takin' chances jest because things has been quiet these two weeks an' more."

Drummond obeyed her behest, and by starting early and taking a circuitous route he rode into Ogden toward noon. Passing along the main street he kept a sharp lookout for any of Jed Hanby's henchmen, but reached Meachem's door without misadventure. Though the lawyer's manner was as suavely effusive as usual, Dirk had a notion he was not altogether pleased to see him.

"I 'm glad you stopped in," he purred, when Drummond had seated himself beside the desk, "though unfortunately I am unable to report

progress. Some—er—slight hitch seems to have developed at the—a—Chicago end."

Drummond's face darkened. "You mean there 's a chance of the money not showin' up by the time yuh said?"

"I should n't go so far as saying that; dear me, no!" returned Meachem quickly. "Besides, you must remember that when I specified that date it was merely to the best of my knowledge and belief and allowed for no—a—unforeseen delays."

There was a slight undercurent of nervousness in the lawyer's voice, and his shifting eyes avoided Dirk's frowning glance.

"What 's the hitch about?" demanded Drummond curtly. "Why should there be delays?"

"The letter from Peebles & Jennifer which came—a—yesterday," explained the lawyer slowly, "merely states—— But I—I 'll read it to you."

Fumbling among a pile of papers on his desk, he presently drew forth a single sheet and leaning back in his swivel-chair as if to get the light, placed a pair of glasses astride his prominent nose. He read rapidly, though with occasional slight pauses that seemed characteristic:

" 'Re settlement of the estate of Jane Steb-

bins, deceased. Replying to your favor of the —er—twenty-seventh ultimo, we beg to inform you that the—er—liquidating of the—er—assets is going forward, but that—a—owing to the present low market value of some of the shares we feel it—a—would be unwise to sacrifice them at the present prices. This may cause a slight delay, but in the end the legatee will profit to—er —a considerable extent, we—er—having information that the shares in question which shortly take an—er—upward turn. Trusting that this explanation will——' ''

Staring at the blank back of the upraised letter sheet and listening intently to the intonations of the lawyer's voice, Dirk suddenly became convinced that Meachem was up to some sort of trickery. His first impulse was to demand a sight of the letter. Then, realizing that even if he found that the man was playing him false and had, as was quite possible, been bought up or influenced by Jed Hanby, it would be next to impossible to obtain lawful redress with such an official as Judge Driscoe on the bench, he decided to try another method less likely to rouse Meachem's suspicions.

"By golly!" he exclaimed sharply, half rising

and staring intently through the dingy window. "Ain't that Jed Hanby crossing over back there?"

Aged as the trick was, it worked. With a protesting squeak, the lawyer's swivel-chair swiftly became horizontal, his skinny hand holding the letter fell abruptly to the desk, and, twisting around, he peered apprehensively through the window.

Dirk's glance eagerly sought the letter. There was time for him to make out the printed heading and address of the Chicago lawyers, and to note, with a feeling of disappointment, that the first two lines corresponded to what Meachem had read aloud. Then suddenly his eyes sparkled. The date——

"I don't see him," broke in the lawyer pettishly. "Are you sure——"

"He was right over there by that shed," affirmed Dirk, pointing with one hand, while his eyes remained fixed on the letter. "Must 'a' stepped in back of it, I s'pose. O' course it might not 'a' been Hanby, but——"

He paused as the lawyer swung around to face his desk, and seemed to be staring curiously out of the window.

"You must have mistaken some one else for

him," Meachem said in a tone of annoyance, making haste to place the letter face downward on the pile of papers. "Of course," he added quickly, with a furtive glance at Drummond, "there 's no reason why he should n't be in town, but I—er—have n't seen him about much lately."

He took out a handkerchief and, under pretense of blowing his nose, furtively wiped his forehead, which was dewed with tiny drops of moisture. The movement was not lost on Drummond, who wondered whether Meachem's fear was lest Hanby blunder into the office and find him there. Nothing of this, however, appeared in his expression, which was purposely angry, with a touch of anxiety beneath the surface.

"That 's a helluva note, that is," he complained bitterly. "The dumb fool don't give yuh no idea a-tall how long he 's goin' to hang off payin' up. According to him it may be months before——"

"I hardly think that long," put in Meachem soothingly. "He especially states that there will be only a slight delay. Why, within a week or two I may have word——"

"An' then again yuh may not," cut in Dirk. "Lookit. I gotta have nine thousand o' that money by the twenty-first o' this month. When yuh said the whole bunch would be along in three

months I went an' got me an option on a ranch, an' paid that thousand down. If I don't come across with the rest on time, what 's goin' to happen? I 'll lose the ranch an' the thousand both, won't I? Shore. Well, then, yuh can see I gotta get it somehow, even if I have to borrow it an' pay high interest. That oughta be possible, I sh'd think."

He threw out the feeler more as a matter of curiosity than from any real belief that Meachem would respond favorably. And he was right. There was, indeed, a flash of covetousness in the lawyer's fishy eyes as he, perhaps, computed the pleasing amount of usury he might squeeze out of such a sum. But it vanished swiftly, and he protested with oily, reiterated expressions of regret how utterly impossible it would be to borrow anything like that amount.

Dirk let him talk on, growing more and more convinced that the man was crooked, and restraining with great difficulty an almost irresistible desire to put both hands around that skinny neck and choke the real truth out of him.

His departure was abrupt, because of the growing strain upon his self-control. That almost snapped when, as he stood up suddenly, Meachem suggested smoothly that he might be able to per-

suade the owner of the ranch to extend the period of his option.

"Fat chance o' that," he growled. "I might try it, but—— Lookit here. Yuh get busy an' write them lawyer fellahs that I don't give a hoot if they do lose somethin' sellin' them stocks now. It 's my money, ain't it? Shore. An' I want what there is of it——quick. Yuh tell 'em that, an' mebbe they 'll act sensible."

Stamping across the room, he jerked open the door and slammed it hard behind him. But as he paused a moment beside his horse his face lost that assumed expression of irritable, half-anxious bluster and grew suddenly hard and menacing.

"He 's crooked as a corkscrew, the lousy pup!" he grated under his breath, his eyes narrowing. "Accordin' to the date, he 's had that letter two weeks instead o' gettin' it only yesterday like he said. He 's up to some deviltry; yuh can stick a pin in that!"

Swinging into the saddle he rode around to the rear of Dorlan's and left his horse in the corral. On entering the hash-house his first move was to borrow a pencil and a scrap of paper from the cashier on which he carefully wrote out the name and address of the Chicago lawyers which he had observed at the head of Meachem's letter.

"I 'll get the rights of the whole business from them direct," he reflected, as he hastily swallowed his dinner, "an' find out if that skunk's double-crossin' me like I think, an' how he 's doin' it. I dunno why in thunder I did n't think o' that before."

While he was saddling up afterward, Meachem's suggestion about trying to get an extension of the option came into his mind, and he considered it thoughtfully.

"I don't s'pose there 's a mite o' use tacklin' ol' Pop," he decided finally; "but on the other hand it won't do any harm to try. I won't be wastin' such an awful lot o' time goin' around that way."

And so it fell that when he left Ogden shortly afterward he took the trail leading to Painted Post and the Tumbling T's outfit.

CHAPTER XXX

THE FRAME-UP

POP HARTSHORN gave a cackling, sarcastic laugh and thumped the back of a chair with his thin, veined fist.

"No, siree!" he snapped in his sharp, high-pitched voice. "Not a day longer. Yuh run a whizzer on me before an' got me tied up hard an' fast, but yuh don't do it again. That nine thousand 's gotta be paid over——"

"What d' yuh mean, run a whizzer?" demanded Drummond angrily. "Yuh named yore own price, did n't yuh?"

"Mebbe I did, but yuh hustled me so I signed the dumb paper afore I hardly had time to think. An' when I wanted to take it back——"

"Nemmine that," cut in Dirk again. "Yuh signed that option of yore own free will, an' in full possession of all the senses y' ever had. Truth is, yuh old miser, since I was here Jed Hanby 's come an' offered yuh a little more, so yuh want to get out of yore bargain. I'll bet if I

was to jingle five hundred dollars in front o' yuh, you 'd crawl. Yah!" he jeered, noting the avaricious gleam that flashed into Hartshorn's faded eyes. "I knew it. What do yuh do with it, anyhow, y' old fish? Take it outa o' yore desk an' play with it when yuh ain't got nothin' else to do?"

Pop glanced with sudden apprehension at the article of furniture in question. "I—I— It ain't in my—desk," he quavered. "It 's safe in—the bank."

"Yeah?" drawled Dirk incredulously. "I 'll bet all of two bits yo're lyin'. Yuh could n't bear to part with them pretty gold pieces; yuh know yuh could n't." He turned abruptly on his heel and started for the door. "Well, you ain't gettin' no more outa me, y' ole screw," he flung back over one shoulder. "An' don't go bankin' too much on glommin' them thousand iron men off'n me. Remember, that option 's got two weeks yet to run."

Dirk spoke with more confidence than he really felt. Despite the fact that he had been more than doubtful of Hartshorn's willingness to extend the option, the old man's prompt refusal had definitely blocked one trail of which at best there were few enough. There remained only

an appeal to the Chicago lawyers, and when Drummond considered how little time was left, and the variety of legal and other obstacles that could, and undoubtedly would, be thrown in his way by Hanby's coterie, he grew discouraged.

For all that, he had no intention of giving up. He meant to fight hard to the bitter end, and as he rode briskly along the Hidden Valley trail he began to map out in detail the plan of campaign he meant to follow.

It was well into the night when he reached the ranch and crawled into his bunk without disturbing the slumbering members of the outfit. Nevertheless, daybreak found him stirring, and, having breakfasted heartily with the bunch, he went over to the ranch-house for a consultation with Mrs. Foulkes.

Beyond a few terse and rather lurid comments, she had little to say when Dirk outlined the facts he had learned and what he suspected. To them both the situation seemed to call for serious, sober effort rather than invective.

"Hop to it," she advised briefly, when he had finished. "Like I 've said before, I ain't got much use for lawyers, but these here may be straight enough. Anyhow, I can't see there 's much else for yuh to do. You fan it over to Lewis-

town an' send that telegram. They 're pretty straight over there an' won't double-cross yuh like they might in Ogden or Painted Post. Yuh may as well hang around town till the answer comes. Y' oughta have it inside of twenty-four hours."

Dirk nodded and turned to go. "Yuh got that option put away safe, haven't yuh? he asked abruptly, struck by a sudden thought.

"You bet I have!" she told him emphatically. "It 's hid where nobody 'll find it in a hundred years. Don't fret about that."

Drummond still lingered by the door, glancing surreptitiously toward the living-room. He had an uncomfortable suspicion that Anne had hastily left the kitchen when she saw him coming, but there was no sign of her visible in the narrow vista through the open door. At length he turned away with a faint sigh.

"Well, s'long," he said briefly to Mrs. Foulkes. "You 'll see me when I get back."

Riding the roan, Socks, he reached Lewistown in about three hours and went at once to the little railroad shed that served as a station-house. By great good luck one of the two trains that wheezed daily out of this sleepy terminus of the one-track branch-line had just gone, and he found the agent

still about the premises. Provided with a telegraph-blank, he carefully wrote out the following message addressed to Peebles & Jennifer at Chicago:

> Kindly wire at once to me here what has been done to date about settling estate of Jane Stebbins. Settlement was promised by lawyer James Meachem of Ogden before 21st of September, but have been unable to get satisfactory explanation from him. Important to send wire to me personally.

Signing his name, he handed in the message, and having paid for it, he lingered while the agent despatched it on the ticker. In response to his question the operator stated that an answer might show up about this time next day, or "later," with which information Dirk had to be content.

He spent the remainder of the day loafing about the ramshackle hotel and dozing in a shady corner of the back porch. After supper he strolled out to where a number of loungers were gathered in front of the building and, leaning against the door-jamb, deftly fashioned himself a cigarette. He was just applying a match to the brown paper tube when the clatter of a speeding horse drew his glance up the street to where a mounted man, imperfectly visible amid a moving dust-cloud, was rapidly approaching.

Only mildly curious at first, Dirk watched his

progress languidly. Then suddenly something familiar about the man and horse straightened his sagging shoulders and brought a flash of keen inquiry into his eyes. An instant later he recognized Pete Darrell. But though the unexpected appearance of the Hidden Valley puncher indicated some unexpected and probably not agreeable happening, Drummond's face lost nothing of its lazy calm as he lounged forward to greet his friend.

"'Lo, kid," he drawled, pausing beside the lathered horse. "Kinda late, ain't yuh? Supper 's over a good half-hour."

Darrell pushed back his hat and swept the back of one brown hand across his moist and dusty face. "Kinda thought I would n't make it," he returned easily. "Reckon they 'll rustle me somethin' though. I 'll stick Two Bits in the corral an' then see what can be did."

As he started his horse one eyelid fluttered momentarily, but Dirk did not need the signal. Already he had turned and was walking alongside the slowly moving animal, making a casual remark or two for the benefit of the group of loungers. Once around the corner, however, and out of hearing, he glanced swiftly up at Darrell.

"What 's up, Pete?" he asked in a low tone.

"Enough," returned Darrell tersely. "Pop Hartshorn was beat up last night an' robbed of over a thousand dollars. He swears it was yuh that done it. There 's a warrant out, an' Billings an' a bunch o' deputies are huntin' yuh. Get a move on an' saddle up. We gotta light outa here quick."

"You don't mean to say there 're comin' here?" protested Drummond incredulously.

"I shore do. They struck Hidden Valley around the middle o' the afternoon, an' while Ma Foulkes was keepin' 'em busy in the house Anne slips out to tell me she heard 'em say they was gonna look for yuh in Lewistown as well as other places, an' I was to hustle an' give yuh the tip. I was saddled up a'ready an' managed to slip out by the back trail, which gimme half an hour start. But that ain't a helluva lot, so stir yoreself, fellah, unless yo' 're hankerin' for the pen. With a slick frame-up like that you ain't got a chance in the world if yo're caught."

Dirk delayed no longer. Speeding for the corral, he caught up Socks and, flinging the saddle across his back, swiftly adjusted straps and buckles. Mounting hastily, he ranged alongside Darrell.

"If they meet up with yuh," he began, "ain't they likely to——"

"They ain't gonna have the chance," interrupted Pete. "I 'm goin' along."

Drummond's white teeth flashed in a grin. "Atta boy!" he chuckled. "Let 's go, then."

Skirting the rear of the scattered houses which faced the main street, they struck into the trail just beyond the last dwelling and urged their horses westward. They had not gone a quarter of a mile before the distant beat of hoofs made them pull up abruptly.

"That 's the bunch, I reckon," observed Darrell, glancing back over one shoulder. "You wanna kick some more speed out o' that accordeen o' yores, old-timer, if we aim to pull away from 'em."

Dirk followed his suggestion, but as they sped away through the gathering dusk he was not, curiously enough, thinking nearly so much of the pursuing sheriff and his posse, or even of the plight this sudden and unexpected move of his enemies had placed him in, as of Anne Sherwood. She had taken the trouble to send him warning of his peril, and, at the thought of what that might mean, Drummond's heart exulted.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE TELEGRAM

THE robbery of old Pop Hartshorn seemed to have stirred up the entire county to a degree quite incomprehensible to those ignorant of the plot and counterplot that lay beneath the surface. Other men, some of them much more popular than the miserly owner of the Tumbling T's, had been held up before without anything like this fuss made over them. Indeed, one or two former victims, observing the extraordinary pertinacity with which the search for the vanished criminal was kept up, even began to get a little resentful.

To them Sheriff Billings had but one answer. Things had come to a pretty pass when one of their most prominent citizens, a helpless old man at that, could be brutally beaten and robbed of his hard-earned savings and the perpetrator of the outrage escape scot-free. He was sworn to the execution of law and order in Fremont County, and he meant to get his man—who was

undoubtedly a bad egg generally—if he had to chase him through the entire State to do it.

Lofty and noble sentiments, no doubt, and much to be commended in a public official. There were a few scoffers, of course, who, aware of the sheriff's well-known indolence and love of ease, predicted that his enthusiasm would soon evaporate. But they were wrong. As day followed day Billings kept himself and his men on the go, following up clues, searching distant fastnesses, riding busily hither and yon, until the deputies became so galled and weary that their conversation grew to be one long-continued grumble and complaint.

But though Drummond and his companion managed to escape the net, the sheriff's tactics kept them constantly on the move and gave them a number of exceedingly uncomfortable moments, though Billings was deprived of the satisfaction of knowing how close at times he came to capturing the fugitives.

Indeed, his efforts, together with the offered reward, which roused the active interest of a great number of otherwise neutral persons, combined to produce a situation of such stress that Darrell advised getting out of the State and staying away until the storm had blown over.

Drummond, however, steadfastly refused to take the step. After their flight from Lewistown into the mountains he had gleaned from Pete various details of the robbery, which assured him that it was a deliberate frame-up on the part of his enemies. Hartshorn had been dragged from his bed in the middle of the night, bound, gagged, and roughly handled by a masked man of Drummond's height and general build, who then proceeded to break open and loot the desk. During the process he let fall a remark or two, seemingly by accident but, Dirk felt, with only too evident an intention, which strongly roused the old man's suspicions. Drummond's presence at the ranch late that afternoon, and his innocent but unfortunate assertion that the gold was in the desk, must have turned that suspicion into certainty.

"You can see how it would be if I ran away now," Dirk said in answer to Pete's suggestion. "The damn thing would be hangin' over me till hell freezes. By stickin' round there may be a chance o' gettin' at the rights of it. Looks to me even now as if Pinch Gritlin' might 'a' turned the trick. Put a mask on him an' he might pass for me in a dim light."

Back in his mind, too, was the realization that by leaving that part of the country he would abandon for good and all any hope of ever securing the ranch on which his heart was set. It may be supposed strange that any such hope could linger, considering how short a time was left of his option and the fact that he was a proscribed outlaw with a price upon his head. But there was a strong streak of stubborn obstinacy in Drummond's make-up that made him cling to a thing with bulldog tenacity as long as even the scantiest, most improbable chance remained.

But ten days or more of continual shifting through the mountain wilderness, of constant watchfulness, of scanty rest and precarious meals, snatched, some of them, at the point of a gun, were enough to wear down even his high confidence and courage. And the worst of it was that as far as they could see Billings intended to keep up this sort of thing indefinitely.

Came a morning, however, when Dirk could stand the strain no longer. All through their flittings—a dozen times or more a day—his thoughts harked back to that little railroad-shed in Lewistown where surely by this time must repose an answer to his telegram to Chicago. The thing

grew into an obsession, and now, with only three days remaining of his precious option, he resolved abruptly to end the uncertainty.

Fortunately Darrell knew something of the railroad schedule and remembered that the last train from the west arrived in the neighborhood of dusk. Both of them, too, recalled a certain sheltering growth of spruce just across the track from the station and approachable from the rear without passing through the town itself.

So it came about that from this precarious shelter the two friends watched the arrival of the train, the hurried departure up the street of three or four passengers, followed closely by the engineer and fireman, and with keen attention observed the movements of the station-agent until he presently disappeared within the little office.

About sixty seconds later, to that person's surprise, the door opened noiselessly and Pete Darrell stepped quietly into the confined cubbyhole.

"Yuh got a telegram for Dirk Drummond?" he inquired casually.

The agent stared, his eyes narrowing swiftly. "Drummond? Sure. I got two; but you ain't him."

"Yo're a shore enough wizard, son," drawled

Pete coolly. "I ain't, an' that 's a fact. He told me to get it for him."

A curious medley of emotions, in which elation and cunning greed predominated, instantly became visible in the man's face. Pete read his thoughts with considerable accuracy and allowed himself the luxury of a grin.

"I can't give out no telegram except to the person it 's addressed to," stated the agent curtly, if not altogether truthfully. "You tell this here Drummond he 'll have to call for it himself, or else write an order directin' me to deliver it to you."

He was a rather callow young man only recently arrived from the safe security of the Middle West, and his knowledge of the ways and methods of this rough-and-ready country was evidently of the slightest. His simplicity was such that he even took a step toward the open drawer in which reposed the thirty-two-caliber revolver adorned with much glistening nickel which was his pride and joy, to halt abruptly with a ludicrous expression of shocked dismay.

"I would n't," drawled Pete, six-gun trained casually on the man's stomach.

Dirk himself suddenly appeared in the doorway. "Not if yuh know what 's healthy," he affirmed

"I 'm Drummond. Le's have those telegrams, fellah."

With shaking fingers the agent fumbled in a file and produced two sheets of yellow paper. Dirk made no attempt to read them then, merely noting that they were addressed to him and signed by the name of the Chicago law firm. Putting them carefully away in his pocket, he aided Darrell in gagging and tying up the agent with heavy cord from some packages that had just arrived.

"We gotta fix him safe," Pete remarked, as he worked deftly, "otherwise he 'll have the town roused up before we 've turned our backs."

The agent protested quaveringly, but was too cowed to resist, and in an exceedingly brief time he lay helpless on the floor. Dirk then snapped on the spring-lock, and, closing the door behind them, the two sped back across the track.

Mounting hastily, they retreated by the way they had come and did not halt until they were about five miles from Lewistown. Here Drummond swung out of his saddle and pulled the telegrams from his pocket.

"Light a match, will yuh," he requested, "an' we 'll see what's doin.' "

Darrell complied hastily, holding the yellow

flame close to the first of the two sheets in Drummond's hand.

Have had no reply to our wire of the 8th instant [the message read]. Kindly answer that without further delay.

PEEBLES & JENNIFER.

"That must be a second one," commented Dirk after a puzzled moment.

He twitched out the other sheet, and together they read this longer and exceedingly interesting communication:

Do not understand your wire just received. On the 18th ultimo we mailed to James Meacham final account of estate Jane Stebbins with draft for $13,473.00 in full settlement your claim. Draft has been cashed and receipt signed by you and witnessed by notary is in our hands. Please wire full explanation at once.

The match burned down, and with a sharp exclamation Pete flung it hastily from him. Without a word he lit another, and they read the message through a second time.

"The dirty thief!" grated Drummond harshly, as darkness engulfed them again. "He had the money all the time, the skunk!"

"Must 'a' forged yore name to get it," observed Darrell with extreme satisfaction. "That's a State's prison offense, ain't it?"

"He had it all the time," repeated Dirk, ob-

livious to Pete's remark. "I 'll bet the whole wad he 's got it in his safe this very minute.

Laconically Pete agreed that this was likely. Then silence fell, a silence fraught with tension and suspense and a curious sense of stirring passions. It was prolonged until Darrell grew restless and uneasy.

"How much is yore cayuse good for?" inquired Drummond suddenly.

"Good for? Well, not a powerful lot until he 's rested some. Both of 'em been rode pretty steady the last few days. What——"

"I reckon they 'll last fifteen or eighteen miles if we take it easy," cut in Drummond. "That 'll take us around Lewistown and well beyond the X T and the Box L. Then we can rest up and have all day to-morrow to circle through the hills and strike Ogden through the woods to the eastward.

Darrell's jaw dropped. "Ogden! Holy cripesticks! Yo're plumb loco, fellah. There ain't a soul in that rotten burg, hardly, that would n't go after his gun against yuh on sight. Them that ain't with Hanby is jest droolin' at the mouth for that re-ward. What the devil do yuh want to take a chance like that for?"

"I 'll tell yuh." Dirk's voice was hard and

chilly as cold steel and utterly ruthless. "I 'm gonna get that Meachem rep-tile an' get him good if it 's the last thing I do."

"Golly! breathed Pete. "Yuh ain't thinkin' o' croakin' him?"

"Not quite, but when I get done with him he 's goin' to wish mighty passionate he 'd never tried his tricks on me. I 'm gonna choke that money outa him, too, believe me. Yuh need n't to come kid, if yuh d' want to, but——"

"Cut that brand o' talk or there 'll be ructions," interrupted Darrell. "I ain't no quitter. Likewise I aim to be in at the finish, no matter what that is. Let 's drag it."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE LIGHTED WINDOW

DARKNESS had long enfolded the town of Ogden, blurring the crude outlines of its ugly architecture and obliterating the unlovely heaps of tin cans and other litter that circled the county-seat, which in this respect was little better than its humbler neighbors. The back lanes were silent and deserted, the main street very nearly so, with only here and there at widely separated intervals a mellow, yellow square to relieve the general gloom.

One of these lighted windows was in the rear of a dwelling abutting Dorlan's hash-house. And though its brilliancy was considerably obscured by a drawn shade, it became at once the focus of a somewhat dubious interest on the part of two persons stealing silently along the backs of the houses that fronted on this side of main street.

"Jillson's ain't it?" breathed Darrell, as they came to an abrupt halt.

Drummond nodded. After a prolonged and searching scrutiny he bent toward his companion.

"The window 's open," he whispered. "I 'm gonna step over an' see if I can find out what 's doin'. It 's a crumb too near Meachem's to be real comfortable. You wait here till I come back."

He approached the window cautiously, moving slowly, and constantly on the lookout for unseen obstacles. When at last he paused to one side of the casing he observed with satisfaction that the blind had not been drawn quite down. A scant inch of space remained between its ragged bottom and the window-sill, and, promptly stooping, Dirk peered interestedly through the narrow slit.

Within the room three men were gathered around a table, on which stood two bottles, glasses, and a dingy oil-lamp. One of them was Bob Jillson; another, thin-faced, with a hawk-nose and cold, dark, unwinking eyes, was a stranger to Drummond. But his pallor and the edge of a swathing of bandage visible through the open front of his soiled shirt make Dirk suspect him to be the man he had downed at the edge of the wood outside of Ogden, and a glitter of satisfaction came into his eyes. The third person sat with his

back to the window, but something about the shape of his head and his wide, outstanding ears gave the watcher an impression that he was Pink-Eye Krebs. When the fellow spoke any doubts Dirk might have had were at once dissipated.

"It 'll be a dead safe place," commented Krebs, reaching for the nearest bottle. "The house sets down in a hollow well outa sight of anything, an', now Jennings has got out, there ain't no call for nobody whatever to poke around."

"I wonder if Pinch 'll pull it off," pondered Jillson, tilting back his chair a little.

Krebs took a long gulp and rested his glass on the edge of the table.

"Don't lose no sleep over that," he returned confidently. "Gritling 's got brains. Lookit the way he worked that stuff on Pop Hartshorn. The ol' fool 's ready an' willin' to go to co't an' swear his Bible oath it was Drummond that smouched his roll. Besides, Pinch has been snoopin' around for most a week, an' knows the lay o' the land."

Dirk's eyes narrowed, and his lips curled in savage satisfaction. If only Pete were here to be a witness to this unexpected confirmation of his suspicions. His hand slid down and gripped the butt of his Colt, but an instant later the fingers relaxed their hold. He could do nothing now.

Later he would make it his business to get hold of Krebs or Jillson somehow and—— Suddenly his train of thought was broken by the realization that the stranger was speaking.

"I ain't interested in that," the man remarked in a cold, hard voice. "What I 'm lookin' to is downin' this fellah Drummond. Another week an' I oughta be able to top a hoss, an' then I aim to show this pulin' sheriff o' yores how to get a man."

He swore luridly in an icy, impersonal fashion which was, curiously, more effective than a mere display of passion. Bob Jillson rose suddenly.

"Wal, yuh won't back no hoss in a week if yo're gonna sit up till two-three o'clock lushin'," he commented. "Le's hit the corn-husks."

Drummond slipped swiftly away from the window and vanished into the encompassing gloom. The stranger's threats left him quite unmoved. He had already pulled down on him once and felt quite equal to doing it again. Upon the cryptic nature of the early comments he had overheard, he bestowed merely a passing thought. Evidently the gang was up to some fresh crookedness, but he could not see that it had anything to do with himself or his plans.

Rejoining Darrell, he briefly imparted what he

had learned about Gritling's part in the Tumbling T's robbery. While he was talking, the light suddenly went out in Jillson's lower room and the window was closed noisily. They waited until a fainter gleam appeared up-stairs, and then cautiously pursued their way in the direction of Meachem's.

The lawyer's house, five or six doors beyond Jillson's, was plunged in darkness. Indeed, save for the shed in the rear which Dirk had noticed during his last visit, they might have passed it by. Approaching stealthily, they finally gained the rear windows without falling over any unseen obstacle, and found that these were locked.

The contingency, not unexpected, had been prepared for. Drummond, being heavier than his companion, bent over, bracing palms on knees. Mounting agilely on his back, Darrell slid a broad knife-blade between the sashes and, with a little manœuvering, slipped the catch and softly raised the window.

Pete slid to the ground, and for a moment or so the two stood motionless, listening intently. At length, hearing no sound, Drummond drew himself up on the sill and stepped into the office, leaving Darrell to keep watch outside.

The room was pitch-dark, and for a brief space

Dirk did not stir. Then his outstretched hand slid along the back of the swivel-chair, touched a corner of the desk, and slipped exploringly over its smooth surface. Finally with one arm still reaching out ahead of him, he began to tiptoe gently toward the staircase in the farther corner.

CHAPTER XXXIII

MEACHEM PAYS

SNUGLY in bed in his apartment above the office, where he had lain for several hours, Lawyer Meachem suddenly found himself in the grip of a realistic and most repellent dream. In his sleep he had been dallying pleasantly with sums of money—large sums, in fact, contained in a number of heavy canvas bags that clinked agreeably when he moved them. One of these bags stood open, and, after gloating for a space on the alluring golden mass, he was moved—inexplicably, as one so often is in dreams—to thrust his head inside the bag, possibly for a closer inspection of its entrancing contents.

To his dismay the drawstring was instantly pulled tight around his throat. He struggled frantically against that choking pressure, clawing with his fingers and giving forth muffled gasps and pipings of acute discomfort. An instant later he had struggled from sleep to wakefulness to

discover with a sensation of pure horror that a pair of muscular hands circled his throat, and a monstrous shadowy something loomed ominously over him in the darkness.

Frantic with fear, he tore at those gripping hands, his body, under the encumbering bedclothes, thrashing about wildly. Instantly a chilling whisper came from the gloom above him.

"Cut that! Yuh lay back an' don't let a peep outa yuh, or I 'll wring yore skinny neck."

As he recognized the voice of Dirk Drummond, Lawyer Meachem instantly went limp, a cold sweat breaking out all over him. When the pressure about his throat relaxed it brought physical relief but no surcease to his agony of mind.

"Yuh slimy ol' he-buzzard," continued Dirk contemptuously "I 'd be a benefactor to the commun'ty if I 'd choked the life outa yuh. Where's a candle?"

Meachem tried to speak, but only strange gulps and gurgles issued from his dry lips.

"Quit yore garglin' an' say somethin'," admonished Dirk curtly. "I asked yuh where was a candle."

"On—th-th-th—t-t-t-t-table," stammered the lawyer, making a supreme effort.

Drummond rose and groped his way to a small

table standing beside the bed. Having found the candle, he lit it and scowled down at the shivering Meachem.

"Get up," he commanded in a harsh whisper.

The lawyer obeyed as promptly as his trembling limbs permitted, revealing an incredibly lean and elongated frame clad in an abbreviated night-shirt the latter somewhat agitated about the knees, as those skinny members knocked together.

"Lis'n," said Dirk tersely. "We 're goin' down-stairs now, an' yo're gonna open that safe an' hand me out the money. Yuh try anythin' raw, an' you 'll get yores—a-plenty."

A harrowing thought seared through the lawyer's mean soul, and for an instant his fear was superseded by an emotion that was even stronger.

"M-m-money?" he stammered. "I—du-du-du-don't know——"

Drummond reached forward and seized his wrist. "*My* money, yuh louse!" he growled savagely. "Don't try an' pull a whizzer on me. I know all about yore dirty, thievin' tricks, an' how yuh got that draft more 'n three weeks ago an' forged my name to it an' the receipt. I s'pose yuh thought they 'd never know that difference, not havin' seen any o' my writin'. That stunt o' yores makin' up a fake letter as yuh went along

was smart, too, but not quite smart enough. While yuh was lookin' around for the fellah I pointed out to yuh, yuh never thought I might be takin' a peek at the letter yuh was so careful to keep from me, huh? That money 's down in yore safe, an' yuh need n't tell me different. Move!"

It was something of a random shot, but apparently it hit the bull's-eye. Meachem wilted and without a word of protest turned and staggered toward the stairs. His progress was accelerated by the feeling of something cold and hard boring into the small of his back, which sent chills of horror coursing along his spine. Once on the stairs he stumbled and saved himself only by a wild clutching of the rail. When he halted finally in front of the safe his condition was indeed pitiable.

But Drummond was not troubled by compunctions. Considering everything, he felt the man was getting off very lightly.

"Open her up an' do it quick," he ordered.

Face pallid and sweat-dewed, Meachem clutched the dial and turned it feverishly. In his haste he made a mistake and had to start all over again. But finally the tumblers clicked and he drew

the steel door open. Fumbling in a small inner drawer, he took out a fat package of bank-notes and handed it to Drummond, who had placed the candlestick on the floor and returned his six-gun to its holster.

"It 's all here, is it?" Dirk inquired. "Yuh ain't holdin' out none on me."

"Not a dollar——I——I—swear it," hurriedly asserted the lawyer. "It's—just as I got it—from the bank. I meant to——"

"I know what yuh meant to do, yuh rat!" cut in Drummond caustically. Swiftly he flicked over the bills, most of which were of large denomination, peeled off four of them, and thrust the remainder in his shirt. "For once yuh spoke the truth. Now get out that note o' mine."

With a bewildered expression, Meachem obeyed. When Dirk had satisfied himself regarding the paper the lawyer had produced, he put it carefully away in his pocket, and handed over the four bills.

"There 's yore twelve hundred," he stated briefly. "Yuh can't go blattin' around I robbed you, 'cause I got both the note an' a witness that I paid yuh."

Startled, Meachem followed his glance toward

the window through which Pete had been an interested observer of the scene. Drummond picked up the candle.

"Up-stairs!" he ordered tersely, and like a lamb the smitten Meachem obeyed.

Five minutes later he lay in bed again, gagged with a pillow-case and well trussed up with strips torn from one of the blankets.

"I ain't takin' no chances o' yore rushin' out an' rousin' the town the minute my back 's turned," stated Dirk, looking down on him. "Yuh won't suffer no hardship. That kid o' yores 'll turn yuh loose in three-four hours. It 'll give yuh a good chance to think o' yore sins. You 've done forgery, fellah, which is somethin' not even yore crooked friend Driscoe can save yuh from. From now on Fremont County ain't gonna be a healthy abidin-place 'cause if I sh'd come back an' find yuh here—— Oh, I know what 's runnin' through yore slimy mind, yuh skunk, but yuh wanna deal yoreself a new hand. I *know* who pulled off that Tumblin' T's hold-up an' laid it onto me, an' there 's gonna be some ructions around here mighty sudden. Yuh can stick a pin in that."

Without further words he departed, carrying the light with him. As he passed the safe he

closed the heavy door and gave the combination-knob a twirl. Then blowing out the candle, he set it on the desk and dropped lightly through the window.

"Great stuff," whispered Darrell, as they sped through the darkness of the lawyer's rear premises. "I like to choked watchin' yuh an' him through the winder. Reg'lar circus, it was. Didja hogtie-him?"

"Shore. No tellin' what he 'd do if he was loose. He was scairt green, but——"

He broke off abruptly, nerves suddenly tingling. They were passing the shed set at the back of Meachem's lot and had almost reached the corner of the low building. What roused Dirk's suspicions so abruptly he did not know. It might have been a faint rustle or sense of movement, the sound of suppressed breathing—any one of a dozen things. At all events he caught Pete instinctively by an arm and dragged him close to the front of the low building. At almost the same instant the darkness just ahead was split and rent by a red flash; the deafening sound of a pistol-shot seemed to split his ear-drums; the acrid tang of powder filled his nostrils chokingly.

His gun had leaped from its holster, and with the same rapid movement he lunged at the dim

figure revealed almost at his elbow by that momentary spurt of flame. There was a lightning lift and falling of his outstretched arm, a sickening thud as the steel barrel found its mark, a groan and then the sound of a heavy body striking earth. After that——silence.

But not for long. As the two men darted around the shed and started back over the route they had traversed an hour before, the inevitable sounds of people stirring urged them to greater speed. Windows were flung up, voices wafted through the night air; here and there a lighted square flashed out as persons—braver or more foolhardy than their fellows—sought to inquire into the cause of that reverberating shot.

Drummond and Darrell wasted no time in cautious progress. Laying as straight a course as possible for the wood where they had left their horses, they sped through the back lots heedless of obstacles they might—and did—encounter.

The latter were numerous. To the fugitives the way seemed paved with tin cans, empty bottles, and other noise-producing rubbish. Twice Darrell tripped and fell headlong, and once Dirk ran full tilt into a decrepit wagon, barking both shins and painfully altering his features. By the time they reached the horses, sounds from the rear be-

tokened only too plainly that the town was roused thoroughly and completely, and that the foremost pursuers at least had already taken up the chase.

"Damn that cursed fool for buttin' in," panted Pete, scrambling into the saddle. "Who the devil was he, anyhow?"

"Yuh got me. Looked a mite like Chick Dawson's build, but I could n't be sure. I s'pose he saw the light in Meachem's an' got curious."

"What yuh gonna do now?" went on Darrell, as they pushed on through the trees. "We shore can't head for Hidden Valley direct with that bunch a-swarmin'."

"Hardly," agreed Drummond with a shrug. "We 'll have to beat it back like we come, an' cut through the mountains between Ogden an' Lewistown. With luck, that 'll land us there by noon to-morrow, which oughta be jest about in time."

His plan was to get Mrs. Foulkes to take the money and the option over to Pop Hartshorn and complete his bargain. There was some slight doubt in his mind whether or not such a method of procedure was entirely legal, but he had none at all of the ability of that strenuous and pertinacious lady to persuade—in one way or another—the owner of the Tumbling T's to see the light.

CHAPTER XXXIV

GONE!

WEARY and travel-stained, Drummond and Pete Darrell halted their horses briefly on the edge of the cliff overlooking Hidden Valley. It was long past the hour Dirk had set for reaching this goal, but the pursuit had been unexpectedly hot and strenuous, and much time was lost trying to throw their persistent followers off the trail. Indeed, Drummond was n't altogether sure they had succeeded.

"Even if we did lose 'em back there in the hills, they trailed us far enough to have a good idea where we 're makin' for," he commented as they began the abrupt descent. "It won't be safe to hang around the valley long."

"You said it," agreed Darrell. "I wouldn't risk it longer 'n it takes for yuh to turn the money over to Ma Foulkes, an' get a mouthful o' chuck an' a fresh hoss. I expect Billings must 'a' been with 'em. He shore has developed into one persistent cuss."

"I 'll tell a man!" affirmed Dirk. "Hanby

must 'a' made it well worth his while, or else he 's got somethin' on Rufe that——"

He paused, his gaze focusing on a group of persons gathered in the open just beyond the ranch-house.

"Whatsa matter?" asked Pete, who was behind him.

"I dunno. Seems like somethin' 's doin' down there. They 're all bunched in front o' the house, an' Ma Foulkes looks to be——"

"That Ogden crowd could n't of got around past us?" put in Darrell as his friend paused.

"No, it ain't them. It 's all our own gang so far as I can see. Well, we 'll know in a minute or two."

Pushing their weary horses to the limit of safety, they covered the remainder of the descent in silence and then spurred around the grove of trees back of the ranch-house. Dirk was ahead, and as he reached the open his eyes widened at the scene before him.

Stretched out on the veranda lay Pebble Stone, eyes closed and limp head resting on a pillow. One trouser-leg was slit up nearly to his waist, and Mrs. Foulkes and Lush Barton bent over him occupied with lengths of bandage and a bottle. Several other members of the outfit, their faces

dark and angry, stood watching the operation, though as the new-comers appeared their glances swept sharply toward them, and more than one brown hand dropped swiftly to a six-gun.

"Whatsa matter?" demanded Dirk, swinging from his saddle beside the veranda steps.

Mrs. Foulkes turned her head and looked at him. Her face was cold and hard and curiously white, save for a single spot of brilliant color glowing on each prominent cheek-bone. Her lips were set tight and the pupils of her eyes oddly dilated. Her glance held no surprise at seeing him, nor any other emotion save overwhelming fury.

"The matter?" she repeated hoarsely, as if she found it difficult to control her voice. "Anne's —gone!"

Drummond stared at her dazedly. "Gone?" he gasped. "What d' yuh mean? Where——"

Mrs. Foulkes straightened her broad back. "He 'll do now," she told Lush Barton curtly. "Carry him in careful, some o' you fellahs, an' lay him on the bed in my room. He 's went out from loss o' blood an' the pain o' that joltin' an' all, but he ain't in no danger."

She faced Drummond, her black eyes glittering.

"Gritling's carried her off," she stated harshly.

Dirk started as if he had been struck. His face whitened, and then a flood of dark, raging crimson spread swiftly to the roots of his crisp hair. His half-lifted hands clenched spasmodically, bringing out a row of white dots across the deeply tanned skin.

"Gritling!" he repeated in a voice that was scarcely recognizable. "How . . . When . . ."

"Not more 'n an hour ago. Directly after dinner she saddled up an' went off for a ride by herself. She 's been doin' it this week past, actin' like somethin' was on her mind. I dunno why. I warned her to stay up at this end o' the ranch, but she must 'a' got heedless or somethin'. Anyhow, Peb was ridin' fence down to the south end an' seen her an' Gritling lopin' along the creek. First off he thought she was goin' of her own accord. Then he seen Gritling had hold of her bridle, so he chases after 'em. They went in back o' some willows, an' like a fool Peb kep' straight on never thinkin' o' bein' bushwhacked. Result, o' course, Pinch bored him through the leg an' got clean away."

A harsh, inarticulate, throaty growl issued from Dirk's set lips. Mrs. Foulkes drew a quick breath and hastily resumed her narrative.

"Chub an' Frenchy, workin' about a mile away, heard the shot an' hustled over. Peb told 'em what had happened, but by this time he was bleedin' like a stuck pig an' couldn't be left lay there, so they brought him in. That 's the hull of it. We 're gonna hit the trail now. Somebody throw my saddle on the bay while I get my six-gun. That dirty scoundrel 's gonna be shot on sight."

She turned to enter the house, and without a word Drummond flung himself into the saddle. An instant later, however, he hastily dismounted and overtook Mrs. Foulkes at the living-room door.

"Here," he said curtly, dragging a wad of bills from his shirt. "Stick this away some'ers, will yuh? It 's the money."

"The money?" she repeated, taking it mechanically. "Yuh don't mean to say yuh got——"

"Yeah. The hull of it 's there. I choked it outo that skunk, Meachem, who 's been holdin' back on me near three weeks. I was gonna ask yuh to take that an' the option over to Pop an' complete the deal, but that don't matter—now."

He turned to go, but Mrs. Foulkes caught his arm. "Wait a minute," she commanded. Lips parted, she stared thoughtfully at him for a few

seconds. "Why don't it matter?" she went on swiftly. "It would hit Hanby an' that reptile, Gritling, harder than anythin' else on earth. I 'd shore like awful well to run down the beast myself, but with you to take hold it don't so much matter my not bein' along. I 'll do the other thing; danged if I won't."

Dirk jerked his arm free and made for his horse. "All right," he flung back over one shoulder. "Whatever yuh like; I don't care."

In his present mental state there was room in his mind for only one thought, one object. Nothing else on earth seemed to matter. Reaching the corral he swiftly stripped the saddle from the roan he had been riding and transferred it to Jerry, his pet sorrel. Pete, who had preceded him, had already roped Mrs. Foulkes's bay and together they adjusted her saddle and spurred back to join the other men, already equipped with fresh mounts.

Arkansas Ward and Shrimp Ramsey had driven to Lewistown that morning for a load of supplies, and Tod Shasta was not yet sufficiently recovered from his recent wound to undertake an expedition of this sort, though he did his best to persuade Mrs. Foulkes to let him go.

"Nothin' doin'," she told him firmly as she

swung into the saddle. "Like as not you 'd bust yoreself open again. Besides, somebody 's gotta stay along with cook to see to the ranch an' look after Peb. If that sheriff or anybody else comes snoopin' around, yuh keep 'em outa the house if yuh have to do it with a six-gun."

There remained, besides Drummond and Darrell, Chub Gifford, Barton, the foreman, and Frenchy Lamotte, and the instant Mrs. Foulkes loosened rein they swept after her past the bunkhouse and on over the trail leading to the entrance of the valley.

CHAPTER XXXV

ONE OUT OF FIVE

YUH better try the Bar Two first," advised Mrs. Foulkes as they neared the entrance of the valley. "Though I misdoubt he 'd have the gall to take her there. More like they 've fixed on——"

She broke off and stared at Drummond, who gave vent to a sudden, explosive shout.

"Hell's bells! Why—why, she 's at the Cross F!"

An instant before, with the swiftness of lightning, there had flashed into his mind a vivid remembrance of those puzzling, meaningless remarks he had overheard through Bob Jillson's open window the night before. At the time they meant less than nothing to him, but now he realized with a spasm of fierce delight how infallibly they fitted in. As he poured out a hurried explanation, Ma Foulkes's face took on an expression of grim and savage satisfaction.

"Looks like you 'd hit it," she commented. "I

was thinkin' mebbe Frenchy 'd have to trail 'em, which is slow work sometimes, an' likewise uncertain."

"Y' betcha," put in Lush Barton. "Specially when their marks is liable to be washed away complete inside an hour or so."

Mrs. Foulkes turned in her saddle and followed the direction of his backward glance. As she noted the bulk of curious, saffron-colored clouds billowing up over the jagged line of distant mountain-peaks, she gave a snort of disgust.

"My land o' love!" she exclaimed. "Would n't yuh know it? We ain't had a drop o' rain in two weeks, an' here it has to come drenchin' down on us now of all times. Well, can't be helped, an' it may pass around, though I doubt it. Like Lush says, it 's lucky there ain't no trackin' to be done."

There was little chance for further conversation, for within a few minutes they reached the dividing of the trail. Here the party halted briefly while Dirk made an effort to persuade Mrs. Foulkes to take one of the men with her. The suggestion was rejected with scorn.

"If I ain't able to cope with that dried up ol' fossil at the Tumblin' T's," stated the lady with emphasis, "I 'd be plumb sorry for myself."

Roweling her horse, she waved a brief farewell and swung away from them along the trail leading to Painted Post and the Hartshorn outfit. The five men were in motion as quickly, casting, as they rode, occasional appraising glances at the gathering storm-clouds behind them.

"Reckon we 'd better take that short cut over the Hogback," commented Drummond at length. "What do yuh say, Lush? Save us three-four miles, won't it?"

"Shore. Only thing is we wanta cross that ridge before the rain hits us. It 's a mighty mean place to be caught in by a bad storm. Worth takin' a chance, I expect, though."

And so, about a mile farther on, they turned off the trail into a narrow, scarcely perceptible track which, weaving tortuously through gulch and gully, presently began a steady upward climb toward the great, rounded, rocky hillock with a spine down the middle, known in the neighborhood as the Hogback.

For the most part they rode in single file with Drummond in the lead. The saffron-colored clouds, darkening rapidly, were sweeping swiftly across the heavens, sending forth long ragged streamers which presently obscured the sun and filled the atmosphere with an odd, greenish-gray

light. The contrast between those rushing, darkening clouds and the stifling, oppressive absence of even a breath of wind down there below was slightly ominous. Dirk, aware of the unpleasant sense of great forces stirring, was constantly torn between the impulse to push his horse and the knowledge that he must, in a measure, husband the sorrel's strength for what was to come.

In this wise, with alternate bursts of speed and of holding the animal in, he gained at last the gaunt, bare summit of the Hogback—a desolate waste of rock-strewn granite with scarcely a relieving touch of green—a waste rendered even more depressing and forlorn than usual by the gathering gloom. Behind him, at varying intervals, trailed the other four men, and presently a shout from Barton made Dirk twist around in his saddle.

"Chub's cayuse 's gone lame," repeated Lush. "Stepped on a stone or somethin' on the slope. He 's laggin' 'way behind."

Dirk frowned. "We can't wait up for him," he called back. "He 'll have to follow."

His thoughts were centered altogether now on the most difficult section of this cut-off, a narrow, spine-like ridge of rock connecting the upper extremity of the Hogback with the comparatively

level ground beyond. They *must* cross it before the storm struck them, or else——

Deliberately thrusting from his mind the possibility of that alternative, Dirk bent his energies to pushing Jerry over the rough, rock-strewn stretch. He dared not lift his eyes to mark the progress of the storm, but after all that was unnecessary. The threatening clouds had outstripped him and were still rushing onward, rapidly narrowing the strip of gray-blue sky still visible to the southward. Each minute the atmosphere grew darker and more laden with oppression. Drummond grew aware of a trembling agitation all around him, a feeling as ethereal, as impalpable as thistle-down, yet inevitable as fate itself. At any instant he expected to feel against his back the beat of raindrops, the ripping impact of the wind.

Suddenly ahead of him he saw the ridge and spurred the sorrel forward. Now he was upon it, holding a tight rein, guiding the horse with consummate skill. The spine-like bridge was about sixty feet in length. Dirk had successfully negotiated two-thirds of it when, with a shriek and a roar, and a fierce beating torrent of rain, the tempest burst.

The horse staggered under the impact and

bellied down, legs braced and every quivering muscle tense. One hoof slid over the slippery rock, but Drummond, flinging his weight quickly to the other side, managed to drag him upright. Drenched to the skin in a few seconds, half-blinded by the driving rain, he kept the sorrel slowly moving, knowing that unless they crossed speedily they would never cross at all.

The passage of that scant twenty feet was like a thing eternal. And yet, when the sorrel's hoofs struck level ground on the other side, Drummond could scarcely believe that he was really over.

"Good fellah!" he muttered. "There ain't a cayuse in a hundred could 'a' done it."

He rode on a few feet and then, stopping, turned in his saddle and peered back from under his dripping hat-brim. As he had feared, the ridge stretched behind him, narrow, glistening treacherously with the streaming rain, and—quite empty.

His eyes troubled, Dirk rode on a little way and halted just inside the mouth of a narrow cañon. He did not mean to wait long; he could not. Through every yard of the hurried ride the thought of Anne and what she might be suffering had been ever present, stinging him with a keen, passionate urge that would not be denied. But at least he must rest the sorrel, who had emerged

from the struggle trembling with terror and fatigue and nervous strain.

About twenty minutes passed, and then, just as Dirk's hand was tightening on the reins, there came a sudden momentary lull in the strength of the tempest. The shriek of the wind died abruptly. The rain still pelted, but with a perceptibly lessening force. An instant later, out of the gloom shrouding the extremity of the Hogback, a horseman loomed, rode directly upon the ridge, and came slowly but steadily across it.

He was almost over when Dirk recognized Pete Darrell and spurred eagerly to meet him.

"*Some* tight-rope walkin'!" exclaimed Pete, sweeping the water from his eyes. "I 'd rather ride fifty miles around than do that stunt again."

"Where 's Lush an' Frenchy?" asked Drummond briefly.

"Frenchy 's cayuse bolted when the storm hit us. Lush was ridin' that fool bay o' his, an' the idjit tried to do some circus stunts an' slipped off 'n the ridge down into the gully. I guess Lush ain't hurt none to speak of, 'cause I heard him rippin' off a brand o' language that would make an Injin's hair curl. But he 's outa the runnin' for the time bein'. Let 's drag it, fellah."

Dirk had already turned the sorrel, and to-

gether they rode into the cañon. Beyond this the track was direct and fairly easy, and, despite the storm, which had resumed its lashing fury, they made fair progress until they were within seven or eight miles of the Cross F.

Then Darrell's horse began to lag behind. Two or three times Dirk had to wait for his companion to catch him up. When the force of the storm began to lessen, he hoped the animal might pick up. But that hope failed to materialize, and at length they were both forced to admit that the beast was all in.

"No use, ol'-timer," growled Pete, after a final, futile attempt to rouse the laboring pony. "It can't be did. I 'd be only holdin' yuh back all the rest o' the way, an' this ain't no time for holdin' back. Yuh go ahead an' I 'll follow as fast as I can. Better cut into the Cross F on the west side. Got yore pliers?"

Drummond slapped his chaps pocket. "Shore," he nodded, picking up his reins. "Well, s'long, kid. See yuh—later."

He touched the sorrel gently with his heel. The animal responded readily, and Darrell, staring after them with a wistful longing in his keen blue eyes, watched horse and rider dip down into a hollow and vanish from his sight.

CHAPTER XXXVI

RETRIBUTION

THE Cross F ranch-house lay at the bottom of a roughly circular hollow some distance back from the main trail. Indeed, because of its peculiar situation, it was invisible from any direction save at a very short distance. As a matter of fact, there were rumors that the builder—a person of questionable reputation whose violent demise some years before had been of considerable pecuniary advantage to neighboring ranchers—had chosen the site with that very object in view.

To Drummond, studying the situation from a shallow draw about a quarter of a mile away—remembering that past reputation and his present errand—the building had a distinctly sinister look. There was something secret and furtive in the way it hugged the ground, presenting a blind, windowless wall to the keen-eyed watcher, who felt that it was only too fit a spot for the perpetration of evil deeds.

Entering on the Cross F land through a hastily made gap in its western fence, Dirk had pushed on to the entrance of the draw where, by reason of its extreme shallowness and lack of cover, he was forced to leave his horse and make the rest of his way on foot. The great force of the storm was over, and, though it still rained spasmodically, there were signs that clearing was not far off.

He almost wished that torrential deluge had kept up a little longer to render easier his approach across this open stretch. It was not that he feared personal risk; that had at no time entered into his calculations. But he realized perfectly that Anne's safety depended on him and him alone, and for that reason he was barred from doing anything foolhardy.

Nevertheless he had no intention of dawdling here long. He had merely paused to look the ground over and make sure his gun was in working order. But as he lay there flattened to the ground, peering through a tuft of bunch-grass at the thin spiral of smoke curling from the low, squat chimney, something happened that roused him to an ungovernable fury and flung him into instant action.

Abruptly the door, which was set in a wall run-

ning at right angles to the blank space facing him, was thrown open, and Anne herself dashed out followed closely by two men. One of them was Hanby; the other, his foreman, Gritling. Dirk could have shot the former easily enough; but Gritling, snatching at the girl's flying hair, halted her before she had taken a dozen steps, and as he dragged her back toward the house her slim body formed a shield for his.

The door had scarcely slammed after them when Drummond was on his feet, running. His face was twisted and distorted with wild passion. His white teeth were bared savagely, and in his eyes there gleamed an insane light. As he crossed the open in great, leaping strides strange guttural sounds of fury issued from his throat.

Reaching the door, he halted, crouching for an instant, gathering his muscles like a wild beast about to spring. As his left hand sought the latch, Hanby's sneering voice came to him distinctly through the thin boards, and seemed to turn his blood to boiling vitriol.

"You 'll do what I say, yuh wildcat. Yo're gonna stay right here ontil yuh give in. An' lemme tell yuh this: If yuh don't come around mighty sudden, I 'm likely to change my mind, in which case you 'll wish yuh had married me

when you 'd got the chance. Twist her arm a mite more, Pinch. She 's——"

Crash! The door flew open, and Dirk Drummond, eyes flaming with a murderous fury, leaped across the threshold. Not three paces distant crouched Anne, with one arm—the wrist imprisoned in Gritling's relentless grip—forced painfully around behind her back. Facing her, hands on hips, a taunting grin curling his thick lips, stood Jed Hanby.

That grin froze there as Drummond swiftly sent a bullet through Gritling's brain; turned, then, to a snarl, and one hand flashed down to his holster. He was too late. His fingers had barely gripped the butt of his six-gun when he staggered under the impact of two bullets in his body and crumpled backward to the floor.

Released, Anne turned a dazed, terrified glance at her rescuer. Then into her frightened eyes there leaped a great light.

"Dirk!" she cried. "Oh—Dirk!"

She stumbled to her feet, swayed, and would have fallen had not Drummond, leaping forward, caught her just in time. And as his left arm circled her limp body and held her tenderly, he fired across her shoulder at Pink-Eye Krebs, ap-

pearing suddenly in a doorway leading to the rear room. With a yell of pain the latter collapsed, a bullet in his thigh.

To them entered Mrs. Foulkes, flushed and breathless, a six-gun gripped in her capable right hand. Her keen black eyes took in the situation with a single sweeping flash.

"Ha!" she commented in a tone of satisfaction. Her lips pursed slightly. "Ha!" she said again.

Stepping over Hanby's motionless body, she approached Drummond and the girl.

"Fainted, ain't she?" she inquired. "I thought as much. Poor dear! This ain't no place for her. Take her outside an' lay her down easy. It 's stopped rainin'."

Dirk hesitated, his glance warily on the rear door.

"There may be some more of 'em back——"

"I 'll see to them," interrupted the lady competently. "You go."

As Dirk, dropping his weapon back into the holster, lifted the girl tenderly, Mrs. Foulkes strode unhesitatingly toward the rear premises. Just inside the doorway she came upon the groaning Krebs and halted.

"It 's you, is it?" she inquired tartly. "Well,

yuh got yores, or some of it, anyhow. Where 's that two hundred yuh stole off'n me, yuh dirty thief?"

"I 'll give it back; I shorely will," wailed the stricken Krebs. "I got it all safe. Ain't yuh gonna do somethin' for me? I 'll bleed to death if I lay here much longer."

"No such luck," ripped out Mrs. Foulkes callously. "You 'll live to ruin a good hemp rope, yuh will; don't fret."

She pushed on into the kitchen, and at the sight of Mrs. Pritchard, crouching terrified in a corner, her wrath flamed up afresh.

"So you 're mixed up in it, yuh hussy!" she rasped, glowering at the woman. "Get up!"

Mrs. Pritchard stumbled to her feet to receive a buffet on the cheek from Ma Foulkes's hard and calloused palm that sent her reeling against the wall.

"Call yoreself a woman, do yuh?" railed that lady, with another hearty slap. "An' yet yuh help a passel o' scoundrels against a poor girl that never done yuh a mite o' harm. Take that, an' that."

Relentlessly she rained blow after blow on the cowering, wailing Pritchard, accompanying the assault with a running fire of angry comment.

"I 'll make it known what kind of a low-down trollop yuh are, I will. You 'll be run outa town, an' mebbe tarred an' feathered if I have any say. There"—with a final smack—"stop that squallin', or I 'll give yuh somethin' to holler about. Anybody around here but them three scoundrels?"

"N-no," wailed the woman. "N-not another s-s-soul. Oh, don't hit me again, Mis' Foulkes. I' m all bruised up now, an'——"

"Yuh 'd oughta be beat to ribbons with a loaded quirt," cut in Mrs. Foulkes. "Gimme a dipper o' water."

With trembling haste Mrs. Pritchard hurried to obey. Mrs. Foulkes took the dipper and, with a curt order for her not to stir out of the kitchen, returned to the other room to find Darrell and Lush Barton surveying the scene with keen interest.

"Some thorough clean-up," commented the former. "Dirk responsible for the three of 'em?"

"Shore. I got here jest as the smoke was clearin'."

The lady's tone was regretful, and as she passed out into the open she sighed. In a moment or two she had reappeared.

"She 's comin' around all right, the lamb," she announced. "Thought I 'd leave the two of 'em

alone. My land o' love!" she added pettishly, glancing toward the moaning Krebs. "Somebody tie a rag around his leg, for goodness' sake, an' stop his yowlin'. While yo're at it, Pete, just glomm the money he stole outa my safe. He 's got it on him some'rs, yuh bet. Lush, I wisht you 'd take a look through Gritling's clothes while we 're waitin'. I would n't wonder if yuh found that thousand he got off'n ol' Pop."

"How 'd yuh make out with that deal?" asked Barton, as he methodically performed the requested task. "Yuh find Pop—agreeable?"

Mrs. Foulkes grinned. "After a li'le arguin'," she returned. "I will say this for the ol' fossil. When he heard who really done the robbin', he up an' rared around like a wildcat. Never thought he had so much spunk. I expect that 's what actually done the business for Dirk, turnin' the ol' man again' Hanby an' all his gang. What 's that? A money-belt?"

She took the bulging chamois belt, which Barton had removed from under Gritling's shirt, and weighed it in her hands.

"Heavy, ain't it?" she commented. "I guess that 's the goods. Well, one o' you 'd better ride in to Painted Post an' send out a few reputable citizens to take charge temporary. We 'll have

Billings an' the cor'ner on the job to-morrow. Looks like we 'd have a nice little shake-up in the county 'count o' this, an' mebbe be able to live decent an' lawful for a change. Reckon I 'll jest step out an' tell the new ranch-owner what I done. It may cheer him up."

She went only as far as the door, however, and, after peering out for a moment, returned chuckling.

"It can wait," she told the two men, her black eyes twinkling. "He don't need no comfortin' right now."

Her judgment was entirely correct. About five minutes before, Anne had recovered sufficiently to get on her feet and even to walk about a little, but there still seemed to be need of a supporting arm about her waist. Her face was turned toward Drummond. Her hair, lovely in its disorder, brushed against his cheek.

"You 're sure it is n't—just pity?" she murmured; "that you 're not—not sorry for me because——"

"Pity!" he broke in, his voice a bit unsteady, his eyes devouring her radiant beauty. "Oh, girl—girl! Does this seem like—pity?"

Irresistibly he drew her closer, and his lips sought hers. She gave a little gasp, but did not

stir. . . . Presently, relaxing, she looked shyly up at him, face flushed, eyes softly brilliant.

"Does it?" he persisted, with that transforming grin of his.

Her lids drooped. "Well—n-no," she whispered, lips close against his brown cheek. "Not —exactly."

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Foursquare. Grace S. Richmond.
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God's Good Man. Marie Correlli.
Going Some. Rex Beach.
Gold Girl, The. James B. Hendryx.
Gold-Killer. John Prosper.
Golden Scorpion, The. Sax Rohmer.
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Golden Woman, The. Ridgwell Cullum.
Gray Phantom, The. Herman Landon.
Gray Phantom's Return, The. Herman Landon.
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Greater Love Hath No Man. Frank L. Packard.
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Greyfriars Bobby. Eleanor Atkinson.
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Havoc. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
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Heart of the Hills, The. John Fox, Jr.
Heart of the Range, The. William Patterson White.
Heart of the Sunset. Rex Beach.
Heart of Unaga, The. Ridgwell Cullum.
Helen of the Old House. Harold Bell Wright.
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Hillman, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
Hira Singh. Talbot Mundy.
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Hopalong Cassidy. Clarence E. Mulford.
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House of the Whispering Pines, The. Anna Katharine Green.
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Innocent Adventuress, The. Mary Hastings Bradley.
Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu, The. Sax Rohmer.
In the Brooding Wild. Ridgwell Cullum.
In the Onyx Lobby. Carolyn Wells.
Iron Trail, The. Rex Beach.
Iron Woman, The. Margaret Deland.
Ishmael. (Ill.) Mrs. Southworth.
Isle of Retribution. Edison Marshall.
I've Married Marjorie. Margaret Widdemer.
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Jeeves. P. G. Wodehouse.

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Mr. Pratt's Patients. Joseph C. Lincoln.
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My Lady of the South. Randall Parish.
Mystery Girl, The. Carolyn Wells.

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